United Nations S/PV.7929

Security Council

Seventy-second year

Provisional

7929th meeting
Thursday, 20 April 2017, 10 a.m.
New York

President:	Mrs. Haley/Ms. Sison	(United States of America)
Members:	Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	Mr. Llorentty Soliz
	China	Mr. Liu Jieyi
	Egypt	Mr. Aboulatta
	Ethiopia	Mr. Alemu
	France	Mr. Delattre
	Italy	Mr. Cardi
	Japan	Mr. Bessho
	Kazakhstan	Mr. Rakhmetullin
	Russian Federation	Mr. Iliichev
	Senegal	Mr. Seck
	Sweden	Mr. Skoog
	Ukraine	Mr. Kyslytsya
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. Rycroft
	Uruguay	Mr. Rosselli

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

Letter dated 10 April 2017 from the Permanent Representative of the United States of America to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General (S/2017/305)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

Letter dated 10 April 2017 from the Permanent Representative of the United States of America to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General (S/2017/305)

The President: In accordance with rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the representatives of Bahrain, Bangladesh, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, Haiti, Iceland, Indonesia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Liechtenstein, Malaysia, Maldives, Morocco, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Norway, Oman, Pakistan, Peru, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, the Syrian Arab Republic, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and Viet Nam to participate in this meeting.

I propose that the Council invite the Permanent Observer of the Observer State of Palestine to the United Nations to participate in this meeting, in accordance with the provisional rules of procedure and the previous practice in this regard.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite Mr. Nickolay Mladenov, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General, to participate in this meeting.

In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I also invite the following individuals to participate in this meeting: His Excellency Mr. Neville Melvin Gertze, Vice-Chairman, Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, and His Excellency Mr. João Vale de Almeida, Head of the Delegation of the European Union to the United Nations.

I propose also that the Council invite the Permanent Observer of the Observer State of the Holy See to the United Nations to participate in this meeting, in accordance with the provisional rules of procedure and the previous practice in this regard.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I wish to draw the attention of Council members to document S/2017/305, which contains a letter dated 10 April 2017 from my delegation addressed to the Secretary-General transmitting a concept note on the item under consideration.

I welcome Mr. Mladenov and give him the floor.

Mr. Mladenov: I thank you, Madam President, for this opportunity to again address the Council on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question. I took note of the presidency's interest this month in discussing a number of issues pertaining to the Middle East and North Africa region. I will therefore highlight some of them in my presentation and defer to my fellow United Nations envoys who regularly brief the Council for greater detail on many of these challenges.

Today, a perfect storm has engulfed the Middle East and continues to threaten international peace and security. Millions have been displaced in the biggest refugee crisis since the Second World War. In many countries, societies have fractured along ethnic or religious lines. Non-State actors have taken control of territory and terror attacks have spread indiscriminately, striking civilians of all origin and confession. From the onset, I would like to pay tribute to the countless victims of these senseless acts of violence and call on the international community to show its full and unwavering commitment to defeating terror and incitement, to supporting the forces of moderation against extremism, and to untangling the Gordian knot of political, economic and foreign forces that are driving the myriad conflicts in the Middle East.

Developments in the Arab-Israeli conflict continue to resonate across the region. The question of Palestine remains a potent symbol and rallying cry that is easily misappropriated and exploited by extremist groups. Ending the occupation and realizing a two-State solution will not solve all the region's problems, but as long as the conflict persists it will continue to feed them.

Sporadic violence has continued in recent weeks, as five Palestinians and one Israeli were killed in various acts of violence. Among the fatalities were two Palestinian teenaged boys, shot by Israeli security

forces outside Ramallah, as well as a British woman who was murdered by a Palestinian man in Jerusalem.

In March, Israel approved the establishment of a new settlement and declared some 240 acres as State land inside the occupied Palestinian territory. These moves further undermine the territorial contiguity of a future Palestinian State in the West Bank. Tenders for close to 2,000 housing units, the vast majority in major population centres close to the 1967 lines, were also issued. I take note of recent reports that Israel has adopted a policy of restraint by which construction will be advanced "almost exclusively" in the built-up areas of settlements, but it is too early to determine how this policy will manifest itself on the ground. Settlement construction is illegal under international law and I urge all such activities to cease.

On the Palestinian side, multiple worrying developments are further cementing the Gaza-West Bank divide and dangerously increasing the risk of escalation. In April, the Palestinian Government reduced payments to thousands of Palestinian Authority employees in the Gaza Strip. It is important that the burden of decisions to reduce expenditures be fairly distributed and made with due consideration to the harsh conditions under which people in Gaza live.

Four months ago, Palestinians in Gaza went to the streets when people were left with only a few hours of electricity per day. The situation was temporarily resolved with the help of Qatar; however, a more serious crisis is now unfolding again as electricity is down to less than six hours per day. The social, economic and political consequences of these developments should not be underestimated.

Meanwhile, Hamas continues to tighten its iron grip over Gaza by forming an administrative committee that is seen by many to be a direct challenge to the legitimate Palestinian Government. Following the assassination of one of its militants, it temporarily put in place a series of restrictions preventing Palestinians and internationals from leaving and banning fishing for two weeks.

On 6 April, three Palestinians were executed by Hamas in gross violation of international law and without a fair trial. These actions were condemned by the Secretary-General, and I am deeply concerned that further extrajudicial executions are anticipated in Gaza. On 7 April, nine people were killed in armed clashes between the newly formed Palestinian joint security forces and members of Islamist militants with links to Al-Qaeda in Lebanon's Ein El-Hilweh Palestine refugee camp. I note that young Palestinians in refugee camps across the region remain particularly vulnerable to extremists and religious radicals, as living conditions in these communities remain extremely harsh. On 17 April, an estimated 1,500 Palestinian prisoners and detainees began an open-ended hunger strike to protest their conditions in Israeli prisons. I am also concerned by today's report of an attempt to smuggle explosive material from Gaza into Israel via medical material. Such actions will only exacerbate existing tensions.

Turning to some broader regional dynamics, several States of the region continue to bear a massive burden from the flood of Syrian refugees. While the international community must do more to stand in solidarity with Syria's neighbours by increasing assistance and burden-sharing, the underlying causes of displacement must be addressed through a political solution to the ongoing conflict.

In Syria, a democracy deficit, systematic repression and wholesale human rights violations, including by the Government — which holds the primary obligation to protect the human rights of all civilians in the country — have combined with a prolonged conflict to create a fertile ground for sectarian polarization, radicalism and violent extremism. One of the greatest contributions we all can make today to the defeat of listed terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the Al-Nusra Front is to achieve a comprehensive and credible political settlement to the Syrian conflict and a political transition that is inclusive, democratic and participatory. Such an outcome would also help to enable a more unified international counter-terrorism response.

I would like to briefly touch upon recent reports of the alleged use of chemical weapons in Syria. If confirmed, this abhorrent action would amount to a serious violation of international law and pose a threat to international peace and security. This is an area in which the Security Council has the primary responsibility, and I hope that it can unite to send a strong collective message that the perpetrators of such attacks will be held accountable.

In Lebanon, on 12 April President Aoun decided to adjourn the tenure of the Lebanese Parliament for one month. It is hoped that this will allow time for Lebanon's leaders to agree on an election law, in

accordance with the Constitution. The Council will soon receive the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of resolution 1559 (2004), which called for the disbanding and disarmament of all militias. Recognizing the vital progress achieved in restoring Lebanon's institutions to their full functioning, it will be essential for the country to seize the current momentum to counter the maintenance and alleged increase of weapons outside the authority of the State.

Libya, as Special Representative Kobler briefed the Council yesterday (see S/PV.7927), has made important strides in the fight against ISIL, which no longer holds territory in that country. However, the stalled implementation of the Libyan Political Agreement is contributing to a political and security vacuum, putting Libya's population and its neighbours at risk of further destabilization. Armed groups have committed grave violations and abuses of human rights. It is critical that the political process be resumed, with the support of the international community.

Meanwhile in Iraq, the security forces supported by the international anti-ISIL coalition are making progress in retaking Mosul. I welcome the efforts of the Government of Iraq to secure and rebuild destroyed areas and to advance the national reconciliation process. That will be essential to depriving ISIL of legitimacy, access to resources and support.

Across the region, social exclusion and marginalization, particularly in areas of prolonged and unresolved conflicts, tend to provide fertile ground for the rise of violent extremism. Unity across ethnic and religious lines, reconciliation and a fair sharing of resources help heal wounds and isolate extremists.

Listed terrorist organizations and other non-State actors, including armed groups such as Hizbullah, have thrived in the climate of weak governance and the failure to protect human rights that pervade the region. It is estimated that over 30,000 foreign terrorist fighters from over 100 Member States have travelled to the Middle East in recent years to join such groups. Their presence over expanses of territory and accumulation of resources and weaponry pose an increased threat to regional and international peace and security. Some foreign fighters have already returned to their home countries, spreading violence in their own communities.

The humanitarian and social impact of the conflicts in the Middle East is catastrophic. In Syria, hundreds of thousands have been killed since 2011 and approximately half the population is displaced. Over 5 million refugees are registered with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, with nearly 3 million in Turkey, over 1 million in Lebanon and more than 650,000 in Jordan, putting a huge social, economic and security strain on those societies.

In Iraq, over 334,000 people are currently displaced in total as a result of fighting in Mosul. Let me note that most of them are people who have lived for two years under the barbaric rule of Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. Owing to intense efforts by the Government and humanitarian partners in Iraq, operations have kept pace with growing needs but capacities are strained. In Yemen, the poorest country in the Middle East, the situation continues to deteriorate as 18.8 million Yemenis are in need of humanitarian assistance, including a shocking 10.3 million who require immediate help. More than 2 million are internally displaced and over 2 million children are acutely malnourished.

I urge the Security Council and all stakeholders to do everything in their power to protect and spare civilians from the brutal effects of those conflicts and as required under international law. Regardless of the causes, whether defence or counter-terrorism, the abuse of human rights in the conduct of any conflict can never be justified. It serves only to reinforce the fundamental drivers of extremism and violence.

The complexity of the region's conflicts means that political solutions based on justice, dignity and social cohesion are required to achieve and sustain peace. Developments on the political front continue. In Yemen, Special Envoy Mr. Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed is consulting with key regional and international actors in an effort to build support for the framework of peace talks, as well as to mitigate the effects on the civilian population of military hostilities.

On 12 April, the Security Council heard from Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura, who underscored that there can only be a political solution to the bloody conflict in Syria. I reiterate his urgent call for the Council to unite behind the United Nations-convened intra-Syrian talks in Geneva on political transition as per resolution 2254 (2015) and the 2012 Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex).

Efforts to revive engagement between Israelis and Palestinians to achieve a negotiated and sustainable peace must also be intensified. In that regard, I am encouraged by ongoing efforts by Egypt, Jordan and

the United States to advance the prospects for peace. On 29 March, the League of Arab States convened in Jordan for their 28th annual summit where, once again, the leaders of 22 countries endorsed the Arab Peace Initiative.

In closing, let me reiterate the words of Secretary-General Guterres that the region requires a surge in diplomacy for peace. Member States, especially through a united Security Council, will have to assume the leading role, including by advancing the implementation of relevant Security Council resolutions. In today's world, there can be no justification for terrorism, nor for the glorification of those who commit it. But without justice, dignity and the protection of human rights, communities will continue to fracture and provide fertile ground for extremists. To that end, the fragility of States must be addressed. Governments need to respond to the legitimate demands of their people and strengthen social cohesion and reconciliation. That is the first line of defence against extremism. Efforts to strengthen the voices of moderation and build religious tolerance must also be strengthened.

Divisions within the region have opened the door to outside interference and manipulation, breeding instability and sectarian strife. Multilateral approaches and cooperation are necessary to address interlinked conflicts, cross-border humanitarian impacts and violent extremism. Let us not forget that behind the images of savagery, behind the shocking statistics of human suffering, there are millions fighting every day, not only for their own survival but, for the true humane essence of their cultures and societies. They are the true faces of the Middle East, and we must do all we can to help them prevail.

The President: I thank Mr. Mladenov for that thorough briefing.

I now give the floor to the Permanent Observer of the Observer State of Palestine.

Mr. Mansour (Palestine): At the outset, I congratulate you, Madam President, on your assumption of the presidency of the Security Council, confident of the United States' skilled guidance of the Council's important work. I also express our appreciation to the United Kingdom for its leadership of the Council in the month of March.

I thank the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Mr. Nickolay Mladenov, for his briefing to the Council.

Before making my national statement, I wish to note that, while the State of Palestine is Chair of the Group of Arab States for April, the Council of Arab Ambassadors has decided that Jordan, in its capacity as host and president of the 2017 Arab Summit, shall deliver today's statement on behalf of the Arab Group. We align ourselves with that statement, as well as with the statements to be delivered on behalf of the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

We meet at a time of simmering crises, rising tensions, and declining optimism about prospects for Middle East peace. At the heart of the instability in our region remains the Palestine question, a grave injustice that continues without remedy, causing misery to millions, and that continues to pose a threat to international peace and security. The persistence of that injustice also continues to fuel perceptions of bias and double-standards and to be exploited by extremist elements as justification for their vile actions and as a recruitment tool. There can be no discussion of countering extremist terror and stabilizing the region without recognizing that fact, as well as the imperative of addressing the root causes of our region's conflicts, in order to fully resolve them and allow us to enter a new era in the Middle East.

That said, it is beyond clear that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is about the denial of a people's inalienable rights and a prolonged foreign occupation; it is not a conflict arising from incitement or terror. A territorial solution and fulfilment of rights are what will resolve the conflict, ending the Israeli occupation of our land and realizing Palestinian national aspirations and rights, including to self-determination and freedom and a just solution for the Palestine refugees, in conformity with international law, the relevant United Nations resolutions, the Madrid principles and the Arab Peace Initiative.

The Security Council has a role and responsibility to foster such a just and peaceful solution, consistent with its mandate under the Charter of the United Nations. Resolution 2334 (2016) is the most recent articulation of the Council's positions, decisions and determination in that regard and reflects the long-standing international consensus on the issue. We reiterate that resolution 2334 (2016) is not anti-Israel; it is anti-settlements,

anti-violence and anti-violation of international law, and is therefore actually and clearly pro-peace and pro-two-State solution — Palestine and Israel — and was globally welcomed as such. The resolution provides the most viable path to preserving the two-State solution on the 1967 lines and creating the conditions necessary to end the occupation, justly resolve the conflict in all aspects and make Palestinian-Israeli peace and security a reality.

Once again, we call for full respect of resolution 2334 (2016). In that connection, we welcome the Secretary-General's report pursuant to the resolution, as orally delivered on 24 March 2017. Yet, we reiterate the expectation for written reports to ensure proper documentation of the implementation of the resolution's provisions and of the developments promoting or obstructing its objectives.

In addition, while the report rightly reiterated the call for the complete cessation of illegal Israeli settlement activities, it echoed the call for a cessation of violence and incitement, reaffirmed the global consensus on the two-State solution, noted ongoing international efforts to promote it, and reflected on the worrying reality on the ground. We believe that further analysis, based on international law and the context of the occupation, and recommendations to rectify the negative trends are required in future reports to assist the Council in upholding its duties. We await the next report in June, which will coincide with the marking of 50 years of the occupation.

We condemn Israel's disrespect of Security Council decisions, as evidenced in its flagrant violations of resolution 2334 (2016). Thousands of violations have been deliberately carried out, including the advancement of at least 6,000 more settlement units in the months since the resolution's adoption — even the establishment of a new settlement — along with other violations in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem. Settlement activities are eroding the two-State solution, based on the 1967 lines, and must stop immediately in all manifestations, as demanded by the Council. The colonization, fragmentation, and annexation of our land will never bring peace. Here, we also recall the clear affirmations by the Council that

> "it will not recognize any changes to the 4 June 1967 lines, including with regard to Jerusalem, other than those agreed by the parties through negotiations" (*resolution 2334 (2016), para. 3*);

and reiterate as well the call upon all States

> "to distinguish, in their relevant dealings, between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories occupied since 1967" (*ibid., para. 5*).

Actions consistent with these provisions are more urgent than ever.

Each day, as more violations entrench the occupation, hope and potential for a solution are considerably diminished. At the same time, Israel's contempt diminishes the Council's own stature and credibility, seriously compromising its ability — that is, of the Council — to act with authority in other crises around the world.

How can this situation be acceptable to anyone, least of all Council members? Security Council resolutions must be implemented without exception. As in any other case, Israel must comply with Council demands and its legal obligations, or be held accountable. It cannot continue to be absolved of responsibility for its crimes and violations, its perpetuation of the conflict, and its obstruction of peace.

I must turn now to the human dimension of this conflict and the endless suffering being caused to the Palestinian people, young and old, by this illegal and brutal occupation at the hands of the Israeli occupying forces and extremist Israeli settlers.

As we meet today, more than 1,000 Palestinians are on hunger strike in non-violent protest of their captivity, inhumane treatment and torture by Israel. This hunger strike, led by Marwan Barghouti, a Palestinian parliamentarian and political leader who has been jailed for 15 years now, aims to call attention to the plight of the over 6,500 Palestinians imprisoned or arbitrarily detained, including men, women, youth, children and elected officials, and to secure the legitimate rights being denied to them by Israel, in grave breach of the Fourth Geneva Convention.

We call for international solidarity with our prisoners — whom we salute from the Chamber — in this peaceful effort to compel Israeli compliance with the law and respect for their human rights and to avert the dangerous consequences of deterioration of this situation. We believe that the International Committee of the Red Cross can play a positive, facilitating role,

and urge all necessary efforts in this regard. Moreover, we stress that the release of our prisoners and detainees is indispensable for peace, one of the most important indicators of the readiness to end the oppression and occupation and to create peace and coexistence.

Today, we must also remind the Council of the appalling situation of captivity of 2 million Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, under Israel's illegal blockade, in an act of massive collective punishment and a crime against humanity. For nearly 10 years, an entire population has been imprisoned, denied freedom of movement, access to livelihoods, access to basic supplies, even vital medicines, deprived of clean water and energy, and forced to live in the ruins of war, as even reconstruction continues to be obstructed and at least 40,000 people remain displaced from the destruction caused by the 2014 Israeli aggression. We caution that hope is fading and despair rising in Gaza, and reiterate our call for an end to the blockade and for respect by Israel of its obligations as an occupying Power under international humanitarian law.

Our calls for respect of international law go hand in hand with our readiness to engage in negotiations to achieve peace. The Palestinian leadership has clearly committed itself to negotiations and has acted in good faith in over two decades of peace processes. We are insistent, however, on international law as the foundation and guarantor of peace. Resolution 2334 (2016) fully recognized this and the Palestinian leadership is committed to the respect of that resolution.

We are engaging with all efforts to advance a just solution. This includes engagement with the new United States Administration of President Trump. Several Arab leaders have met with the President since the Arab Summit, reaffirming their commitment to peace, in line with the Arab Peace Initiative, which marked its fifteenth anniversary last month. That Initiative was remarkably renewed again, and still awaits reciprocation by Israel. President Abbas will also soon travel to Washington, D.C.. My understanding is that he will be meeting with President Trump on 3 May. He is ready to engage in political dialogue with the United States and all other concerned partners, including the Quartet, to launch a credible political horizon, on a clear basis and in a set time frame, that will lead to a solution that ends the Israeli occupation and achieves the independence of the State of Palestine, with its capital in East Jerusalem, based on the two-State solution on the 1967 lines, whereby the Palestinian and Israeli peoples can live side by side in peace and security.

At the same time, internally, we continue to pursue the development and strengthening of our national institutions and to also seek to heal the divisions in the Palestinian political system. We hope that ongoing reconciliation efforts will come to fruition, recognizing the imperative of unity for the achievement of our legitimate national aspirations.

Failure to justly resolve the Palestine question, the crux of the Arab-Israeli conflict, has brought us to several regrettable milestones in this year: the fiftieth year of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip and other Arab territories since June 1967; 100 years since the Balfour Declaration; 70 years since the General Assembly's decision to mandate the partition of Palestine by its resolution 181 (II), which led to the Al-Nakba of the Palestinian people, which continues to this day; and 10 years of Israel's inhumane blockade of Gaza.

The status quo is far beyond unsustainable. This is shown starkly by the prisoners' hunger strike; the immense despair in Gaza; the high tensions in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, as Israel's settlement and wall construction, demolition of Palestinian homes, violent military raids and arrest campaigns, and Israeli settler terror and provocations against our civilians continue unabated; and the painful tragedies being endured by our refugees throughout the region.

It is an explosive situation requiring immediate action to uphold the law, reverse the deterioration on the ground, and avert further crises. We thus call again for responsible, collective efforts to advance a genuine peace process to achieve, without delay, the end of the Israeli occupation that began in 1967 and the just, lasting and comprehensive peace we have long sought.

We appeal to the international community, with the Security Council at the forefront, to heed our appeals and to act urgently on their obligations in order to restore hope in the possibility of peace and to actually make it a reality.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Israel.

Mr. Danon (Israel): Before I begin, I must respond to the hateful lies of the Palestinian representative about the Palestinian prisoners. Marwan Barghouti, the leader of the striking prisoners, is a terrorist and

a convicted murderer. Mr. Barghouti has overseen dozens of suicide bombings and the murder of innocent civilians. He was arrested and tried in a fair and open trial. He was convicted of direct involvement in the murder of five people, including three men at a seafood restaurant, a monk driving to his monastery and Yoela Chen, a mother of two children. Glorifying terrorists not only distances us from peace, it dishonours the memories of the innocent victims.

I would like to congratulate the United States for a successful term at the presidency of the Security Council this month. Israel appreciates the clear moral stand and basic respect for fairness that you have brought to that role.

For the past 17 years the Council meets regularly to discuss the situation in the Middle East under the false assumption that all the ills of the region can be traced to Israel. When it comes to the Middle East, the Council is stuck repeating the same statements instead of seeking new ways forward to bring stability to our part of the world. The truth is that in a region filled with brutal dictatorships and an endless disregard for civil rights and human lives, Israel remains the one beacon of hope. We are still the only true democracy in our region and the only country where people are truly free regardless of their race, religion, gender or sexual orientation. Quite simply, Israel is a true partner in the fight against terrorism and for positive change in the Middle East.

There is no denying that the Middle East is in disarray. States are dissolving, dictators are using horrific weapons against their own citizens and terrorists are killing innocent people. We welcome the American Ambassador's insistence that today's meeting actually discuss those real causes of so much instability in the Middle East. Let me be clear. There is one country that sows dangerous chaos throughout the Middle East. Where there is terror, where there is death, where there is complete disregard for human life, there is Iran. Just a few weeks ago we witnessed the most horrific manifestation of Iran's influence in Syria. Our hearts ached as we saw the horrible pictures of children, even babies, gassed by the Syrian regime. It was devastating. What kind of leader does this to his own citizens? What kind of monster does this to his fellow human beings?

Israel fully supports the American strike on the Al-Assad regime. It was a moral stance on horrific crimes against humanity. Now is the time for the international community to finally fulfil its 2013 pledge and honour its commitment to remove all chemical weapons from Syria. There is no doubt that the primary blame for these crimes lies with Damascus. But at the same time we must not forget that Tehran is an accomplice to the atrocities taking place every single day in Syria. Al-Assad and his henchmen are puppets of the Iranians, propped up with their funding, trained by their military advisers and armed with their weapons.

Iran's influence in Syria can be found everywhere, from the militias roaming the cities to Iranian attempts to build a port in the Mediterranean. We in Israel know firsthand about Iran's attempts to spread terror and violence throughout the region. We have presented the Council with our latest intelligence about the terror organization Hizbullah in Lebanon. We showed in great detail how their rockets are aimed at Israeli homes, schools and offices. This Iranian proxy entrenched along our northern border is placing its weapons in homes, mosques and hospitals with the intention of once again committing a double war crime — targeting our civilians while using Lebanese women and children as human shields.

We continue to warn that Hizbullah has increased its stockpile from a mere 6,000 rockets and missiles in 2006 to almost 150,000 even more advanced weapons today. Where do these weapons come from? Iran, of course. The Al-Quds Force trains Hizbullah fighters, funnels money to them and directly provides the terrorists with those deadly weapons. We also know that Hizbullah is constantly improving the range and accuracy of their rockets and now are capable of targeting 90 per cent of my country.

Hizbullah is also growing stronger politically. Senior leaders in the Lebanese Government have recently voiced support for those terrorists and some have even gone as far as to describe Hizbullah as a legitimate force in Lebanon. Instead of working with the international community to implement resolution 1701 (2006), those extremists are drowning out the moderate voices in Lebanon who wish to realize the true potential of their country. Hizbullah is not only threatening the delicate calm on our border but endangering the chance of Lebanon ever becoming a stable and peaceful State. Iran has stopped at nothing to arm Hizbullah. It sends arms on convoys over land, tries to smuggle them in from the sea and even unabashedly places them on civilian airlines — such as Mahan Air — and flies them into Damascus and Beirut.

Iran does not only threaten our region through proxies. It also does so directly by supporting terror throughout the Middle East and continuing their ballistic missile tests. Those tests are in total defiance of the international community and the Council has clearly stated that Iran is "not to undertake any activity related to ballistic missiles." (*resolution 2231 (2015), Annex B, para. 3*). Yet, since resolution 2231 (2015) was adopted, Iran has conducted at least 14 ballistic missile tests. The Iranians have not hidden their intentions. In fact, just two days ago they wrote on one of their missiles, "Death to Israel".

That same violent call for Israel's destruction, written on that missile, can be found in the Hamas charter. Let me remind the Council that Hamas is Iran's proxy. It rules the Gaza Strip and holds the people of that region hostage. The founding document of Hamas states that "there is no solution for the Palestinian question except through jihad". As the Council knows, Israel withdrew completely from the Gaza Strip in 2005. We did so in the hope that the Palestinians would create a thriving economy and abandon the path of terror. We destroyed every Israeli home, reduced every synagogue to rubble and even removed every Jewish grave.

Sadly, those hopes for the possibility of peace and better lives for Israelis and Palestinians were dashed. Hamas took over the Gaza Strip and has spent millions of dollars — much of it stolen from foreign humanitarian aid — on rockets, guns and terror tunnels. Meanwhile, the Palestinian people continue to suffer. Almost every week, we uncover a new incident of Hamas manipulating the goodwill of the international community. Employees of recognized humanitarian organizations have been caught aiding terror infrastructure. Food and goods meant for the people of Gaza have been diverted to the black market, where they are sold for funds to buy arms. And official employees of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East not only incite violence against Israelis but also serve simultaneously as Hamas officials.

In the decade that has passed since we left Gaza, Israel has been forced on numerous occasions to fight Hamas and defend our people. During the last round of fighting in Operation Protective Edge, in 2014, Hamas unleashed over 3,000 rocket attacks on Israeli civilians. At the same time, it used sophisticated terror tunnels to try to attack our border communities. Its plan is as simple as it is evil. It aims to attack kindergartens and community centres with the hope of massacring as many innocent people as possible.

Members of the Council must understand that Hamas is unfortunately leading us to the next conflict. Since the end of Operation Protective Edge, we estimate that Hamas has increased its arsenal to over 12,000 rockets. At the same time, it has continued to dig its terror tunnels, day in and day out. Many of these tunnels, which stretch into Israeli territory, are as long as 2.5 kilometres, which is longer than the Lincoln Tunnel connecting New York and New Jersey under the Hudson River. The Lincoln Tunnel is used by millions of people to come to their jobs and then go home to their families. In contrast, the Hamas tunnels are intended to kidnap and kill as many Israelis as possible.

I have here an image illustrating the reach and scope of Hamas' network of terror tunnels from the last operation in Gaza. The green line is the border. Here are the openings of the tunnels in Gaza. Notice how they use civilian homes and hospitals to hide the entrances. Here is where these tunnels end up: next to Nahal Oz, Saad, Kfar Aza, just metres from Israeli towns. They spend millions of dollars on these tunnels.

Council members may ask how Hamas continues to arm and replenish its weapons supply. The answer lies in the words of Hamas leader, Mousa Abu Marzook, who said last June that

> "[t]he support offered by Iran to the Palestinian resistance — be it in logistics, training or funds — is unmatched and beyond the capabilities of other countries. Iran's support and backing to the resistance and the Palestinian cause is clear".

The Hamas representative does not exaggerate this connection. Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman, Hossein Jaberi Ansari, said that "resistance movements are part of Iran's foreign policy". We need to think about that.

To so many members of the United Nations, foreign aid to Gaza means donations to UNICEF or to the Red Cross. This is money that goes towards clean water, education, health. For Iran, foreign aid means supplying deadly missiles and training terrorists.

We welcome the new position that has been proposed with respect to the Security Council and its meetings about the Middle East. We know from our own experience that there is only one way forward for those who really want peace in our region. As

we have said time and again, peace between Israelis and Palestinians will not come from meaningless manoeuvring in international bodies, and it most definitely will not result from one-sided resolutions here in the Security Council.

The chance for real peace to be pursued will only come when the Palestinians abandon terror, end incitement and finally return to the negotiating table. More importantly, the chance for peace and stability for our region depends on the Security Council, and the international community as a whole, recognizing real threats when we see them. I ask a simple question to those who insist on keeping the focus here in the Security Council on Israel: Is Israel at fault for the spread of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant? Is Israel to blame for the dire situation in Yemen? Is Israel responsible for the daily massacres in Syria? The answer is a resounding "no".

We welcome efforts to widen the scope of the meetings of the Security Council to focus on the real dangers in the Middle East. The time has come to finally put an end to the obsessive focus on Israel. The time has come to stop this scapegoating of the Jewish State for every war and conflict in our region. The Council should remain focused on stopping the countries that support sadistic dictators who gas their own people. The time has come for the Council to speak in a clear voice and finally classify Hizbullah and Hamas as terrorist organizations. We are warning that an alliance of evil with Iran at its centre is spreading throughout the Middle East. They seek to spread chaos, terror and instability through a region once known as the cradle of civilization. We call upon the Council to condemn Iran's dangerous behaviour.

The good news is that Israel is no longer alone in standing up to these threats. Countries of good conscience throughout our region are putting the chance for peace and security and the hope for a better future for their people ahead of the conflicts of the past. It is also Israel's hope that this body will begin to seek true moral clarity when it comes to the Middle East. Only then will the Security Council finally be effective in fulfilling its stated role of maintaining international peace and security for the world.

The President: I shall now make a statement in my capacity as the representative of the United States.

Every month, the Security Council convenes a meeting on the Middle East. We have lots of meetings on specific countries and conflicts in the region but today's debate is our opportunity to talk about the Middle East as a whole. It is our opportunity to look at the threats that go beyond one country's borders, the threats that affect not just every country in the Middle East but all too often every single one of us.

Regrettably, these monthly meetings routinely turn into Israel-bashing sessions. That is the way the Security Council has operated for years. It is a formula that is absurdly biased against one country. It is a formula that is painfully narrow in its description of the conflicts in the region. And it is a formula that does nothing to help find solutions. The truth is these Security Council meetings do not do anyone in the region any favours, least of all the Israelis and the Palestinians. These meetings do nothing to bring the parties closer together; they actually work to push the two sides apart. The United States firmly believes that peace is possible between Israel and the Palestinians, and we are actively working towards that goal. Peace will only come from direct negotiations, not from one-sided Security Council meetings and one-sided resolutions.

These biased discussions on the Middle East also impose a real cost. Threats are evolving and do not fit neatly within borders. By limiting itself, the Council ignores the pressing rights that are right in front of us. We should be asking these monthly Middle East sessions to talk about the factors that cause conflict across the region. I thank Mr. Mladenov for his remarks today and for the fact that he went beyond the usual Israel-bashing and touched on the border issues plaguing the region. I will do the same and I encourage other countries to do the same as well. By breaking out of old, familiar, counterproductive patterns, we might actually achieve something valuable.

If we are speaking honestly about conflict in the Middle East, we need to start with the chief culprit, Iran, and its partner militia Hizbullah. Iran and Hizbullah conspire together to destabilize the Middle East and their actions are expanding. For decades, they have committed terrorist acts across the region. Today, they prop up Bashar Al-Assad's brutality, fighting alongside his forces, adding to the killing of thousands of civilians and the misery of millions of refugees. They train deadly militias in Iraq and arm Houthi militants in Yemen. While the Council has paid too little attention to this growing menace, the United States will not. We are going to speak up about Iran and Hizbullah, and we are going to act against their lawlessness.

In Lebanon, Hizbullah, a terrorist organization, uses towns to shield its arsenals of tens of thousands of illegal rockets. In Syria, Hizbullah controls territory on the ground. With Iran's instructions, its militias stand side by side with Syrian troops as they slaughter the Syrian people. Sometimes, Hizbullah is the one giving orders to Al-Assad's fighters. Hizbullah helped Al-Assad starve and destroy Aleppo. According to press reports, when supporters of the Syrian regime die in battle, they sometimes come back with Hizbullah flags on their coffins. As one activist said recently, "Hizbullah designs it, and the Syrian regime wears it". They are reportedly even recruiting Syrian children to join pro-Hizbullah youth groups so they can indoctrinate a new generation, in a new country, with its toxic ideology.

Hizbullah is a terrorist group spreading its influence across the Middle East with the backing of a State sponsor. Iran is using Hizbullah to advance its regional aspirations. They are working together to expand extremist ideologies in the Middle East. That is a threat that should be dominating our discussion at the Security Council.

The United States is not waiting to respond. We have imposed targeted sanctions on Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard and its Ministry of Intelligence for their support of the Al-Assad regime. We recently designated for sanctions members of Iranian-backed terrorist organizations in Bahrain. Iran remains a designated State sponsor of terror, and we continue to enforce all sanctions related to Iran's support for terrorism and destabilizing activities in the region. The United States will work even harder with its partners and allies to disrupt Iran's support for militant and terrorist groups.

All States Members of the United Nations must live up to their obligations. Iran's ballistic missile tests defy Security Council resolutions and further undermine the stability of the region. We call on all States to fully implement resolution 2231 (2015), which bans the transfer of weapons to and from Iran, as well as the arms embargoes against the Houthis in resolution 2216 (2015) and for Lebanon in resolution 1701 (2006). The United States will work closely with our partners to document and address any actions that violate these resolutions. We must take a stand against Iran and Hizbullah's illegal and dangerous behaviour.

How one chooses to spend one's time is an indication of one's priorities. The same is true for the Security Council. The Israeli-Palestinian issue is an important one, deserving of attention, but that is one issue that surely has no lack of attention by the Security Council. The incredibly destructive nature of Iranian and Hizbullah activities throughout the Middle East demands much more of our attention. It should become the Council's priority in the region.

I now resume my functions as the President of the Council.

I want to remind everyone to please respect the speakers and take conversations outside so that they can say what they need to say.

I now give the floor to the other members of the Council.

Mr. Kyslytsya (Ukraine): I thank the United States presidency for convening this open debate, which comes at a time of great uncertainty in the Middle East.

In Syria, we entered 2017 with the same array of factors that had poisoned all the efforts to reach peace last year. Military logic still prevails over the political will to reconcile and the blockade of cities and use of starvation as a means of warfare continue unabated. The use of non-conventional and prohibited weapons seems to be the new norm and perpetrators are walking away without punishment.

We regret that, owing to the eighth veto of the Russian Federation last week, the Council has once again failed to uphold its duties. The Council's continuous inability to address chemical attacks in Syria is leading to further impunity and sending a signal to perpetrators that they can get away with murder.

Proxy warfare in Syria and the fact that foreign-controlled militias are deepening their roots on the ground are increasingly concerning. Sustainable peace and the stabilization of Syria require expedient and organized withdrawal of those militias. This issue bears particular importance for the future of Syrian State institutions. Ukraine condemns in the strongest terms the terrorist attack in Rashidin on 15 April during the evacuation of the towns of Foah and Kefraya.

The highly volatile security environment in Syria continues to aggravate the humanitarian situation. The humanitarian disaster is a reflection of the overall situation on the ground. The Council must be proactive

in addressing this crucial issue. A more effective monitoring, verification and enforcing mechanism is badly needed.

With regard to the Syrian political track, today we are clearly at a very low point. Following the latest two rounds of intra-Syrian talks in Geneva, it is fair to say that, unfortunately, we have not seen much desired progress on either of the 3+1 baskets. Why is that the case? The answer is obvious — it is a lack of political will on the part of the Syrian regime to negotiate in good faith on the core issues. Ukraine is disappointed by the absence of real results from the Astana process and the ceasefire negotiated within its framework. We are afraid that the stalled political process may set in motion a vast number of alternative scenarios that nobody will like. Damascus and its allies need to realize that the ultimate victory standpoint is a mirage which will lead nowhere, prolong the crisis and contribute to increasing extremism.

We are convinced that any political progress would be unsustainable without a clear adherence to the word and spirit of the 2012 Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex), resolution 2254 (2015) and a transparent and strictly scheduled political transition. We hope that the intra-Syrian talks in Geneva will resume in May. That will allow time for Damascus and its allies to demonstrate a change — a change in mindset, in intentions and attitude.

The situation in Lebanon remains key to the security and stability of the Levant. It is therefore important that, after the election of the president and the formation of the Government, the political process maintain a positive momentum. The stability of Lebanon remains, to a high degree, hostage to the developments in Syria and wider regional dynamics. That is why there is an urgent need at this stage to assist Lebanon in establishing its effective control of the border with Syria and prevent illegal arms transfers.

Ukraine sees an urgent need to put an end to violence in Yemen. We are concerned by the rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation in that country. The international community faces an imminent risk of seeing an entire generation of Yemenis traumatized by hunger and war. This is not only an immediate humanitarian challenge, but a long-term challenge for the stability of Yemen and the wider region.

Reaching a negotiated political solution remains complicated. As the parties continue the strife to improve their military positions, the Council's unity on Yemen is badly needed to strengthen the position of the Special Envoy and the Secretary-General in their attempts to break the current deadlock and give peace a chance. We call on the parties to resume direct talks without preconditions and to negotiate in the most flexible and constructive manner that would enable them to swiftly reach a final and comprehensive agreement.

We reiterate our concern about the clear upsurge in 2017 in rocket attacks launched by the Houthi forces in Yemen against objects located on Saudi Arabian territory, as well as those on maritime vessels operating near Bab Al-Mandab. Such attacks should cease immediately and the necessary steps should be taken to de-escalate the situation. The Al-Houthi-Saleh forces must relinquish their arsenal of ballistic missiles under any future peace deal. No long-term settlement of the conflict is sustainable without that.

More must be done to prevent greater numbers of sophisticated weapons from reaching Yemen from abroad. Without a meaningful dialogue, the result could be a disaster, and the only actors that would benefit are the terrorist groups that are increasingly active in Yemen. It is extremely worrying that we continue to see Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula demonstrating a sustained ability to expand its operational support base in Yemen and exploit the deep rifts in war-torn Yemeni society.

With regard to Palestine and Israel, Ukraine has consistently supported the Middle East peace process and the principle of a two-State solution, with Israel and Palestine coexisting in peace and security. The lack of direct dialogue, along with a stalled negotiating process, has led to an extremely unpredictable and explosive situation. As a member of the Security Council, Ukraine firmly believes — and shares the belief of the current President of the Council — that peace can emerge only through direct negotiations.

Underestimating the ability of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and of Al-Qaida, to capitalize on the grievances in the currently unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict could backfire in very unexpected and dangerous ways. In order to prevent such a scenario, the root causes of the conflict must be addressed. Ending the violence and de-escalating the situation are immediate priorities. All sides should take concrete steps to calm the tensions, bring the parties back to the negotiating table, renew the peace process

and re-inject some confidence into the fading concept of a two-State solution.

The rapidly evolving terrorist threat transcends all boundaries in any region. It is benefiting from existing conflicts and continuing to destabilize countries throughout the Middle East. We are concerned about the fact that despite some serious military setbacks, ISIL is still a genuine threat to regional and global security. Mosul, for example, where the military operation to liberate the city is ongoing, is rightly seen as ISIL's last stronghold in Iraq. Its people have suffered enormously in the past two years under ISIL's despotic rule, but they now finally have a chance to be freed from the the tentacles of their monstrous terrorist masters.

While we await the ultimate and inevitable conventional military defeat of ISIL, it is vital that we formulate a day-after strategy by which regional actors should play a leading role in preventing the resurgence of ISIL's clones. Without a clear way out of the multiple crises that are tearing apart the Middle East, particularly in Syria, Yemen and Iraq — coupled with the simmering Israeli-Palestinian conflict — it will be impossible to contain the growing threat of violent extremism and the global spread of terrorist groups.

Mr. Umarov (Kazakhstan): I would first like to express my country's firm condemnation of the heinous terrorist attack of 15 April in Kefraya and Foah, which killed more than 120 children and women and injured hundreds of innocent civilians. On behalf of my Government and the people of Kazakhstan, I would like to offer our sincere condolences to the Syrian people, particularly the families of the victims, and to wish the injured a speedy recovery.

We would like to thank Special Coordinator Nickolay Mladenov for his briefing on the situation in the Middle East, and we would like to comment on some key issues.

With regard to the Palestinian question, we urge both sides to demonstrate the political will necessary to reach a historic and long-awaited peace agreement by strengthening the peace, security and development nexus. Promoting economic confidence-building measures between the parties will help to accelerate a political settlement based on the principle of two States for two peoples. That concept should guarantee the inalienable right of Palestinians to statehood and Israel's right to security. We are of the view that negotiations should be resumed as soon as possible in a bilateral format with no preconditions, and mediated by the Middle East Quartet.

The catastrophe in Syria has spread beyond the region and is having global repercussions. Kazakhstan supports the efforts of Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Russian Federation, Turkey and the international community to bring the Syrian Government and opposition together. The upcoming meeting to be held in Astana on 4 and 5 May is intended to carry forward the Geneva negotiations that are scheduled to take place soon after.

While doing everything possible to ensure the well-being of the Syrian people, we urge the international community to make a coordinated effort to combat the terrorist activities of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and other organizations. In that regard, we would like to remind the Security Council of Kazakhstan's initiative to develop a code of conduct for anti-terrorist operations, which represents a major step towards establishing a worldwide, United Nations-led coalition or network for implementing the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy.

In Lebanon, the formation of a new Government and the election of a new President are positive events leading to the holding of free and fair parliamentary elections. We should help Lebanon consolidate its Constitution and democracy, which remain contingent on developments in its neighbour Syria. The Lebanese armed forces are playing a vital role in maintaining security on the border with Syria and throughout Lebanon and thereby helping to avert threats from ISIL and Al-Nusra. Syrian refugees in Lebanon now number more than 1.5 million, and the international community must provide the country with more assistance.

The conflict in Yemen has no military solution; as with all other conflicts and crises, only a diplomatic and political settlement can resolve it. All the parties involved in the conflict, along with their allies, should end all warfare and every form of military force. It is clear that the deep-seated contradictions in Yemeni society can be resolved only through a broad, inclusive national dialogue.

The worsening humanitarian situation in the Middle East demands urgent action on the part of all of us to mitigate the suffering of the local populations, especially in besieged cities. The humanitarian crisis impedes progress on political processes, and the failure to achieve political progress is an obstacle to solving the

humanitarian crisis. Similarly, the exodus of refugees from Syria and other countries in the region has brought political problems to the host countries and caused geopolitical tensions with far-reaching implications in Europe and other countries around the world, resulting in worsening destabilization. Besides that, we have also been witnessing outbursts of xenophobia, hostility and Islamophobia that must be urgently addressed if we are to maintain harmony within and among nations.

Finally, I would like to emphasize Kazakhstan's strong commitment to ensuring that the long-awaited peace in the Middle East can be reached, based on the fundamental principles of compromise, mutual respect and political dialogue.

Mr. Skoog (Sweden): I would first like to thank Special Coordinator Nickolay Mladenov for his briefing. The United Nations and its agencies deserve to be commended for the increasingly challenging work they are undertaking in the field across the Middle East. I would like to start with three issues relating to the Middle East peace process.

First, the Palestinian question has been on the agenda of the United Nations since the Organization was founded. Today, 70 years later, after decades of violence and suffering affecting both sides, and after 50 years of occupation, it seems clear to all that the parties by themselves are unable to resolve the matter and reach the solution that the Security Council is striving for — two States, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security.

Reaching that final-status agreement would have several positive regional side effects. It would enhance regional cooperation, diminish regional tensions and remove some of the arguments used to recruit and radicalize youth in the region and beyond. If the Arab Peace Initiative were part of the solution, those positive side-effects would be multiplied, creating a whole new regional dynamic that would benefit all constructive actors. That highlights the importance of maintaining the Middle East peace process and the Palestinian question on the agenda of the Council. Together with Israelis and Palestinians, the international community and the Council have a responsibility to remain engaged in order to find a just, comprehensive and sustainable resolution to the conflict, and regional partners have a key role to play.

Secondly, there is now a real sense of urgency regarding the issue of settlements. Developments on the ground continue to take us further away from the two-State solution. The idea of a status quo is an illusion. The increased number of settlement units and the growing incidence of the demolition of Palestinian homes and infrastructure will only lead to further suffering. That will spark continued and recurring outbursts of violence, which must, of course, be condemned. It will also have severe repercussions for regional peace and stability. The settlements, the separation barrier built on occupied land, the demolition of homes and the evictions are illegal under international law. They negatively impact the human rights of Palestinians and seriously threaten the two-State solution. Indeed, the viability of the two-State solution could soon move beyond our reach. Israeli settlement expansion in the West Bank must, therefore, come to an end.

In line with European Union policy, Sweden strongly condemns the so-called regularisation law, which seeks to allow the confiscation of privately owned Palestinian land. That law, as well as the Israeli announcements regarding thousands of new illegal settlements units on occupied land and the decision to establish the first new settlement on the West Bank in over 20 years, constitute flagrant violations of international law, as stated in resolution 2334 (2016). They also undermine peace and the viability of the State of Palestine. Resolution 2334 (2016) on settlements, violence and the distinction between Israel and occupied land was also in line with the important recommendations made in the report of July 2016 by the Quartet (see S/2016/595). The resolution has clear messages for both parties, and both parties have a duty to implement its provisions.

Thirdly, the situation in Gaza remains tense and unsustainable. All parties must act responsibly and in the interests of the inhabitants of Gaza. Steps must be taken to produce a fundamental change in the political, security and economic situation. That includes intra-Palestinian reconciliation, accelerated reconstruction and an end to the Israeli closure policy. The full and sustainable opening of the crossing points for humanitarian organizations and State representatives, with due consideration given to both Israeli and Palestinian security needs, is key.

I would now like to say a few words on Syria and Lebanon.

The conflict in Syria has entered its seventh year, with devastating human suffering. The repeated use of chemical weapons in the conflict is appalling and must

stop immediately. We support the full investigation of the attack on Khan Shaykhun on 4 April and the work by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in that regard. We condemn in the strongest terms the horrific attack in Rashidin on 15 April, which killed 126 people, including many children. We welcome the readiness of the United Nations to scale up support for evacuees and call on all parties to protect civilians, which is their obligation under international humanitarian law.

Intensified efforts to achieve a real nationwide ceasefire are urgently needed. A political agreement on the basis of resolution 2254 (2015), including a credible political transition, is the only path to sustainable peace in Syria. Key stakeholders must intensify efforts to facilitate progress on launching the next round of United Nations-led intra-Syrian talks in Geneva under the leadership of Secretary-General Guterres and his Special Envoy, Staffan de Mistura.

We welcome recent progress in Lebanon. It is now important to reach an agreement on a new electoral framework and to hold timely parliamentary elections.

In conclusion, settling the Middle East peace process and realizing the two-State solution is, first and foremost, in the interest of Israel and Palestine, but also in the interest of wider regional peace and security, as it will create better conditions for dealing with other regional conflicts and tensions. A two-State solution must meet the security needs of both parties and Palestinian aspirations for statehood and sovereignty, and it must end the occupation and resolve permanent status issues. The two-State solution is seriously at risk, and we must now avoid any prejudging of the outcome of future negotiations, such as the status of Jerusalem as the future capital of the two States.

The parties hold the key to finding a final status solution, but the international community, including regional actors, must also meet their responsibilities by supporting the parties in their efforts to break the current deadlock. We welcome the efforts by the United States of America to move the issue forward. The Council, too, has an obvious role in shouldering that responsibility and in moving forward with concrete and constructive ideas on how to solve the conflict. We have a very important task ahead of us.

Mr. Iliichev (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We thank the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Mr. Nickolay Mladenov, for his comprehensive briefing. We also thank the American delegation for convening today's event. However, we would like to express our categorical disagreement with the attempt to tailor this meeting to the domestic American context and exclusively to American foreign policy objectives.

For example, in the concept note (S/2017/305, annex) prepared for this meeting, whose topic has traditionally read, "The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question", our American colleagues have remained silent on the Palestinian issue. Moreover, in the document prepared by the United States delegation we do not find any reflection of the threat posed by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Sham, Jabhat Al-Nusra and other extremists and terrorist groups of all kinds, nor of the fact that civilians in Syria, Iraq and Libya continue to suffer from the excesses committed by those groups. The terrorist acts that they have carried out cause death far beyond the borders of the region.

Perhaps the authors of the concept note do not have any objections to that phenomenon. Indeed, we are invited to label those who are fighting those groups in Syria as terrorists. The authors advise the Security Council to think about "who are the regional players that most benefit from the chaos in the region?" But we have a question as well: Should we not search for such players beyond the region?

In point of fact, one should proceed from the premise that the Palestinian-Israeli problem and — in a broader context — the Arab-Israeli settlement should remain at the centre of the regional agenda and of the international community's attention. Without a solution to that long-standing conflict, a long-term and stable stabilization of the entire Middle East is impossible. Despite the fact that other fierce and destructive wars are aflame in the region, the situation demands that the Security Council not lose sight of the need to search for ways to establish a formula to ensure the peaceful and safe coexistence in the region of two States — Israel and Palestine. We must not forget the lamentable plight of the Palestinians and the high level of violence in Israel and on the occupied Palestinian territories.

The current situation with regard to the Palestinian-Israeli question remains extremely complex. Various incidents in the West Bank and Jerusalem, as well as periodic tensions around the Gaza Strip, show that the risks of the escalation of the conflict remain high. One of the reasons for the growth of extremist feelings among

Palestinians has been the unilateral actions by Israel. Those actions have sought to create irreversible facts on the ground, including the expansion of settlements in the occupied territories.

In that regard, we would like to recall that Russia voted in favour of resolution 2334 (2016). In so doing, we assumed that its content would be based on tried and tested formulae. We think that that resolution sends a clear signal that unilateral actions are unacceptable — either by Israel or by the Palestinians — as would be any actions that pre-empt the outcome of the peace negotiations. It also states that it is important that we preserve the prospects for a two-State solution.

Together, we must look for a way to intensify the work on the Palestinian-Israeli peace process. We support the coordination of international efforts on the Middle East settlement, based on tried and tested mechanisms and those approved by Security Council resolutions, primarily the Middle East Quartet of international mediators. Our initiative to organize a personal meeting in Moscow between Mahmoud Abbas and Benjamin Netanyahu remains on the table. We hope that, despite the possible domestic political considerations, the leaders of Israel and Palestine will demonstrate commitment to a peaceful settlement and will start direct Palestinian-Israeli negotiations.

On 6 April, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued an official statement in support of the two-State solution, stressing the imperative of creating a Palestinian State within the 1967 borders. We recognize East Jerusalem as the capital of that State. At the same time, the Russian leadership took a decision to recognize West Jerusalem as the capital of the State of Israel. We think that that step is consistent with the well-known international legal basis for a Middle East settlement. In practical terms, our recognition of West Jerusalem will not, however, change anything until the parties agree on all final status issues, including the future of Jerusalem. We intend to keep our Embassy in Tel Aviv.

A most serious problem in the Middle East is that of terrorism, which has assumed unprecedented dimensions. It is spreading towards Africa, Asia and Europe. Unilateral actions are futile, something that we have already seen on numerous occasions. We must solve such problems together within the United Nations. Unfortunately, owing to the numerous violations and disregard for the fundamental principles of the Charter of the United Nations, such as the independence and the sovereign equality of States, non-intervention in their internal affairs and the peaceful settlement of disputes, the situation in many previously stable countries of the Middle East has become horrifying. For instance, the consequences of the occupation of Iraq, which was initiated under what was clearly a false pretext, continue to impose a heavy burden on the people of that country.

We have also seen the heavy-handed manipulation of Security Council mandates, which has resulted in the destruction and unrelenting chaos in Libya, the methodical incitement of the internecine war in Syria, and the connivance in escalating the spiral of violence and mutual hostility in Yemen. All of those unhealed scars will long remind us of the perniciousness of the ideology of exclusiveness and of the drive to decide the fate of other States and peoples.

In conclusion, I would like to draw the Council's attention to the fact that the destabilization of the situations in the Middle East and North Africa is having a very serious effect on Christians and other religious minorities who live in those areas. Extremists are using violence against those religious minorities so as to incite sectarian strife, which contributes to filling the ranks of the extremists and allows them to benefit from the persisting conflicts in the region. For our part, we will continue our efforts to prevent attacks on Christians and breakdowns in the relations between civilizations and religions.

In that context, we should consider the joint statement made by Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia Cyril and Pope Francis to take immediate steps to stop the mass exodus of Christians from the Middle East. There was also a meeting in Tashkent on 7 April, at which a joint declaration was adopted by the Foreign Ministers of the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States, condemning discrimination and intolerance directed against Christians, Muslims and members of other faiths. We hope that we can serve as an example for other United Nations Member States.

Mr. Rycroft (United Kingdom): I thank Nickolay Mladenov very much for his briefing. As he explained, peace for many people in the Middle East remains a remote prospect and a distant memory.

Two weeks ago, we saw a horrific chemical-weapons attack on Khan Shaykhun in Syria. Environmental samples from the sites have tested positive for sarin. We

are now almost certain that the Syrian regime carried out the attack using sarin. Yesterday, the Director-General of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) confirmed that the organization's incontrovertible evidence indicates the exposure of victims to sarin or a sarin-like substance. The United Kingdom Government supported the United States action in response, and we hope that it will deter any further barbaric chemical-weapons attacks. But when the moment came for the Security Council to show leadership after the attack, it failed. We were stopped by one Council member who would rather prop up Al-Assad than seek justice for the victims.

We will not be deterred by Russia's use of the veto. We will continue to press for accountability in the Chamber. The international community owes it to the people of Syria. Any attempt to tie the hands of investigators will be defeated, just as the Iranian-Russian proposal in the OPCW was defeated today.

As you said, Madam President, we must remember the interplay among the various conflicts in the Middle East region. For a start, we must not let up in our efforts to defeat Da'esh in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere. The United Kingdom supports Iraqi Prime Minister Al Abadi and his Government in their fight against Da'esh and in their efforts to build a stable, secure and unified Iraq.

Iran continues to play a destabilizing role in the region. That is most clearly seen in Syria. Iran has violated its obligations under international humanitarian law in Syria by failing to allow the delivery of humanitarian aid into eastern Aleppo while it was besieged. Iran continues to provide substantial military and financial support to Hizbullah and the Syrian regime. As the Secretary-General's latest report (S/2017/244) makes clear, the leader of Hizbullah has stated that Iran supplies all of their weapons and missiles.

Senior Iranian individuals listed under resolution 2231 (2015) continue to flout the travel ban imposed by the Council. For instance, Major General Soleimani was photographed in Aleppo in September in a show of support for the Syrian regime. Such actions demonstrate that Iran chooses to complicate, not extinguish a conflict that has continued for far too long.

This year marks 50 years since the Six-Day War. This year, either we move towards peace with the support of the region and the international community, or we face an uncertain and dangerous future. Unless the parties show leadership, including the willingness to make compromises, the risk of terrorism and instability will increase. Israelis and Palestinians cannot afford another 50 years of that.

The United Kingdom's long-standing position on the Middle East peace process is clear: we support a negotiated two-State solution leading to a safe and secure Israel living alongside a viable and sovereign Palestinian State based on the 1967 borders with agreed land swaps, Jerusalem as the shared capital of both States, and a just, agreed and realistic settlement for refugees. However, that vision grows distant. As the British Foreign Secretary said last month, the United Kingdom strongly condemns Israel's decision to found new settlements deep in the West Bank — the first such decision in more than 25 years.

Such announcements run counter to international law and have seriously undermined the prospect of two States for two peoples. As a strong friend of Israel and one prepared to stand up for Israel when it faces bias and unreasonable criticism, the United Kingdom urges Israel not to take steps that move us away from our shared goal of peace and security.

It was because of our support for the two-State solution and commitment to Israel as the Jewish homeland that we voted in favour of resolution 2334 (2016), but we recognize that the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is deeply complex. Settlements are not the only obstacle to peace. The people of Israel deserve to live free from the scourge of terrorism and anti-Semitic incitement, which, as the Quartet report outlined, has undermined the prospects for a two-State solution. It is critical that the Palestinian leadership implement the recommendations of the Quartet's report and continue their efforts to tackle terror and incitement, strengthen institutions and develop a sustainable economy.

We must continue to press Israelis and Palestinians to refrain from actions that make peace more difficult. It is because the conflict between Israel and Palestine is one of the central issues in the Middle East that the United Kingdom supports a regional approach to peace. The changing regional context, the Arab Peace Initiative and converging Arab and Israeli interests present an opening. We recognize that additional impetus is needed, and we welcome President Trump's interest in working towards a deal that meets the requirements of

both parties. The United Kingdom's view remains that the two-State solution is the best way to achieve that goal and is ready to do all that it can to support that. We do not underestimate the challenges, but, if both parties show leadership, peace is possible.

Mr. Delattre (France) (*spoke in French*): I thank Nickolay Mladenov for his commitment and briefing, which highlights once again the risks posed to the entire region by the lack of a settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The conflict has dragged on for nearly 70 years, and the occupation of the Palestinian territories has lasted nearly 50. The lack of a settlement in the Arab-Israeli conflict, which is in and of itself of particular gravity, also poses a permanent threat to international security. By its gravity, its symbolic dimension and its place in the collective imagination, the scope of the unresolved conflict is foundational and goes far beyond the borders of Israel and the Palestinian territories. Any escalation in the conflict carries the risk of uncontrollable regional destabilization. That is why we cannot resign ourselves to a false status quo that masks a day-by-day regression, both on the ground and in the mind.

The end point of this path is clear. The disappearance of the two-State solution, like a mirage in the desert, would represent a leap into the unknown and the risk of unleashing a worst-case scenario. The situation is even less acceptable considering that we all know that the best guarantee of the security of Israel and the region is a just peace with the Palestinians, which arises through a two-State solution that ensures the creation of a viable and independent Palestinian State. That is not an ideological stance but a pragmatic and realistic observation, since there can be no denial of the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinians to statehood or the equally legitimate aspirations of the Israelis and the Palestinians for peace and security.

It is on the basis of that observation that France embarked on an international process that led to the adoption in Paris on 15 January of a joint declaration signed by more than 70 States and international organizations. The declaration was the result of all ongoing efforts, particularly those of the Middle East Quartet, the Arab Peace Initiative, the initiatives of Russia and Egypt, and the essential role played by the United States. The declaration reinforced the unanimous commitment of the international community to the two-State solution and the fundamentals that bind us, namely, the international framework of any future settlement — the 1967 borders and the relevant resolutions of the Security Council.

We reaffirmed that priority at the Paris conference in spite of the fact that the prospects for a two-State solution are endangered on the ground every day. The absence of a political process, the encroaching settlement policy — which is illegal under international law and has fragmented the Palestinian territories for decades — the deterioration of the humanitarian situation, the destruction of Palestinian infrastructure in Zone C, violence and incitement to hatred, terrorism and rocket fire are all elements that feed a relentless vicious circle threatening the very conditions necessary to lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Those were the conclusions reached by the Quartet in its July 2016 report, and it was the shared observation that led to the adoption by the Security Council of resolution 2334 (2016).

Since early 2017, the situation on the ground has further deteriorated. Announcements of settlements by the Israeli Government have increased, including concerning more than 6,000 housing units in the West Bank and East Jerusalem in the first three months of 2017. On 6 February, the Knesset enacted a law opening the way to the normalization of unapproved settlements, which are illegal even under Israeli law. IN late March, the Israeli Government decided, for the first time in two decades, to establish a new settlement in the West Bank and declared new private Palestinian land to be "State lands".

As for the policy of restraint in matters of announced settlements, it is a mere optical illusion whose conditions are so vague that they actually give carte blanche to the ongoing rampant settlement-building in the most sensitive areas — the very ones that cause despair and escalation of conflict. Those developments are contrary to international law and Security Council resolutions, in particular resolution 2334 (2016), which requires Israel to halt its settlement activities and to respect its obligations under international law. France also condemns with extreme firmness all acts of violence and terrorism, which remain an almost daily and unacceptable reality. I want to be unambiguous on that point. France will never compromise with Israel's security.

In this context of extreme volatility, it is more important than ever to recall our position on Jerusalem. Pending a negotiated settlement of the conflict and

under international law, including resolution 478 (1980), France does not recognize any sovereignty over Jerusalem. Its status will have to be resolved by negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians, which will have to allow Jerusalem to be the capital of the two States, Israel and the future State of Palestine.

The elements that triggered the three wars in Gaza over the past six years are still present today and could once more lead overnight to an eruption of conflict. From the perspective of a lasting settlement, the lifting of the Israeli blockade on the territory seems more necessary than ever.

After years of stalemate, it is our duty to re-establish the conditions for the resumption of credible political negotiations. The Security Council, through resolution 2334 (2016), renewed its commitment to supporting the parties during the negotiations and the implementation of a peace agreement. It was also the message of the joint declaration of Paris, the purpose of which was to remind the parties of their interest in peace and how the international community could, without imposing anything, help them get there. To reiterate, France will support any effort to reopen a credible political process, which is the only answer to despair, radicalization and disengagement among the parties. We will spare no effort to that end.

Let me say a few words about Syria, which is one of the most important threats in the region. The cessation of hostilities no longer exists. The humanitarian situation is catastrophic because of the lack of access to populations in need. On 19 April, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons indicated that it had conclusive evidence that sarin gas had been used in the attack of 4 April at Khan Shaykhun, which constituted a war crime and whose perpetrators must be held accountable before justice.

Chemical weapons are only one element in the work of annihilation in Syria. In addition, there are inhuman sieges worthy of the Middle Ages, the indiscriminate use of barrel bombs, incendiary bombs, as reported by the United Nations in recent days, torture, executions, displacements and many others crimes. That appalling record belongs and foremost to Bashar Al-Assad and bears his signature written in blood. There will be neither peace nor reconstruction in Syria so long as the regime clings to power through terror and destruction. Nor will any victory be achieved against the terrorist threat, which will continue to feed on the violence and misery that gave birth to it and caused it to flourish, as we were sadly reminded by the terrible attack carried out in Rashidin on 15 April.

More than ever, a political solution is urgent and inevitable. We encourage the Special Envoy for Syria, Mr. Staffan de Mistura, to begin on an accelerated timetable the next round of negotiations in Geneva for a political transition, in line with the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex) and resolution 2254 (2016). That is our top priority — an issue of national security for France and of collective security for us all.

Finally, allow me to add a comment on the situation in Lebanon. That country is linked to France by a profound friendship, and its resilience to suffering demands our admiration. The international community will continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with Lebanon in facing all the consequences of the Syrian conflict, beginning with the refugee crisis. Providing support and essential humanitarian aid is the primary objective of the conference convened in Brussels on 4 and 5 April by the European Union.

The Lebanese people have made political and institutional progress since the election of Michel Aoun as President of the Republic and the establishment of a Government by led by Saad Hariri. It is our hope that the Lebanese parties will be able to agree as soon as possible on an electoral framework leading to free and fair elections, consistent with the Constitution. It will not be possible to indefinitely extend the Parliament that was elected in 2009. Legislative elections are crucial to Lebanon's stability and the preservation of its democratic tradition. Political progress must be strengthened in order to reinforce State authority throughout Lebanese territory and allow the country to address its challenges.

In that context, Lebanon's disengagement from the Syrian conflict and implementation of resolutions 1701 (2006) and 1559 (2004) remain more necessary than ever. We therefore encourage the parties to firmly reconfirm their commitment to that end, in the interest of Lebanon and of the entire region.

Mr. Bessho (Japan): I thank the presidency for convening this debate and for preparing the concept note (S/2017/305, annex) before us. I would also like to thank Special Coordinator Nickolay Mladenov for his briefing.

Today I will address the wider Middle East region, focusing on some of the challenges defining the present day Middle East.

The Middle East peace process is one of the central issues shaping international relations in the region. The conflict between the Israeli and Palestinian sides feeds into wider regional dynamics and the opportunity cost has been immense. Peace there would unlock new political, economic, security and cultural opportunities, to the benefit of the region and beyond.

To achieve peace, underlying issues of conflict, including settlement activities and violence, must be addressed. Japan's position has been clear and consistent. Settlement activities are in violation of international law, and the recent announcement by the Israeli Government that it will build a new settlement is deeply concerning. Japan is also concerned by the continuing violence. Various instruments, such as the Quartet report and most recently, resolution 2334 (2016), provide steps towards credible negotiations, which is the only way to achieve lasting peace. Japan calls upon both parties to take concrete steps to that end, and continues to support a two-State solution to accommodate the aspirations of both sides.

The spread of terrorism and violent extremism is an issue that plagues the region. In Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya, the deterioration of governance, coupled with conflict and political turmoil, has benefited terrorist groups, further escalating tensions and exacerbating conflict. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is also not free from the risk of radicalization. The effects of regional turmoil have spread far beyond its source, as we have seen in the massive movements of refugees and migrants and the expansion of terror threats into Africa and Asia.

We have seen some progress in our fight against terrorism. Japan believes that unless further efforts are made to strengthen governance, it will be difficult to consolidate the gains made and to counter the social, economic and political conditions that feed violent extremism. To strengthen governance, progress in the political process is necessary. As the Secretary-General noted in his first statement to the Security Council (see S/PV.7857), we need a surge in diplomacy. We definitely need it in Syria and Yemen. Libya also requires further international support to make headway on the political track.

The United Nations, including the Security Council, has an important role to play. While each country's political process should be different, Japan believes that creating tolerant and stable societies embodying coexistence and inclusivity is a common goal for the region. Such societies are resilient to violent extremism, spillover conflicts and relapse into conflict. That goal should complement the political process.

In this regard, Japan stresses the need to focus on three issues: humanitarian assistance, including host community support, social stability and governance, and investment in human capital. To give an example, Japan has contributed to the United Nations Development Programme Funding Facility for Immediate Stabilization in Iraq, to support the early return of internally displaced persons to their homes and to enhance social resilience. Through measures such as the restoration of key infrastructure and generation of income and employment opportunities, we support the Government of Iraq in stabilizing the newly liberated areas to ensure that they do not slide back into turmoil.

Turning to Yemen, Japan aims to boost the resilience of urban and rural communities, in partnership with international organizations, through micro-businesses and entrepreneurship projects that enhance the economic empowerment of women and youth. Our efforts to create inclusive societies extend to addressing the needs of the vulnerable in conflict situations. Japan has introduced maternal and child health handbooks to Palestinian refugee communities. The handbooks help mothers and children keep track of their health conditions so that they can receive timely and appropriate medical treatment. Most recently, we have launched a smartphone appl of the handbook in Jordan, thereby making it more convenient and accessible. We aim to further expand the coverage of the app in the coming years.

In closing, Japan reiterates the need for a shared region-wide effort to achieve enduring peace. Efforts to create tolerant and stable societies should complement the political process. Japan attaches importance to post-conflict reconstruction efforts that build and consolidate peace under a credible political process, and will continue to actively engage in such efforts. We must also bear in mind that peace can have a positive ripple effect. Japan remains convinced that a successful Middle East peace process will unlock the potential for region-wide stability and prosperity.

Mr. Rosselli (Uruguay) (*spoke in Spanish*): Like my colleagues before me, I congratulate you, Madam President, on organizing this open debate, and thank Mr. Nickolay Mladenov, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, for his informative briefing. I again reiterate Uruguay's full support for his work.

The Middle East remains the epicentre of numerous armed conflicts of extreme complexity, including sectarian and inter-faith elements. Participants in those conflicts include not only regional and other States, but also various non-State entities, such as militias and armed groups, that claim supposed religious affiliations based on intolerance and fundamentalism that violate the population's most basic human rights and fundamental freedoms. We have also witnessed the rapid growth of terrorist groups such as Al-Qaida, Jabhat Fath al-Sham — better known as the Al-Nusra Front — and Da'esh, all of which have exploited the institutional vacuum in various countries of the region. Such absence of State power in many cases stems from foreign military interventions that were not authorized by the Charter of the United Nations or by the Council and that in recent years have led to chaos and death for the civilian population.

Of course, this is not the only cause of terrorism, which also feeds on the deep religious, sectarian, ethnic and tribal divisions that have dominated the region for centuries, as well as the evolution of these societies, in which we sometimes see a lack of political freedom as well as the excessive repression that fuels radicalization.

Nor can we overlook another evident reality that explains how these extremist groups have managed to survive, despite their savage acts and their total contempt for human life, as an ongoing presence in the contemporary history of the Middle East. This reality is the military, logistical, financial and political support of some States of the region as well as outside of the region, which use them as tools in order to pursue their own agendas and interests, as they do with the armed militias and groups that I have mentioned.

Several of these groups, which try to hide behind the label of "moderate opposition", have perpetrated acts that are just as, or even more, reprehensible as those committed by the terrorists themselves, with whom they sometimes ally themselves, depending on the circumstances.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, owing to its duration and its spillover into the rest of the region, remains the most relevant of all of the situations that affect the Middle East. Uruguay reaffirms once again, as we have been doing since 1947, its unwavering support for the right of Israel and of Palestine to live in peace, within secure and recognized borders, in a framework of renewed cooperation and free of any threat or action that would breach that peace.

Likewise, we reiterate our support for a solution involving two independent States, convinced that this is the only option that will allow the peaceful coexistence of Israel and Palestine, and in this respect we call once again for the resumption of negotiations between the parties, which is a crucial step towards achieving that goal. To achieve that goal, we must reverse the current trends on the ground identified in the most recent report of the Quartet, failing which it will be difficult for Palestine to strengthen its State.

The adoption of resolution 2334 (2016) was a clear sign of the importance that the international community attaches to the peaceful and successful conclusion of this process. The announcements made in the past three months by Israel on the expansion of its settlement policy violates the provisions of that resolution and of resolution 242 (1967), which states that the acquisition of territory by force is inadmissible.

These measures, as well as the recent episodes of violence and terrorist attacks, the incitation thereto and their glorification, do not help in the least to move towards peace together and also risk endangering the possibility of a two-State solution.

Uruguay welcomes all international initiatives that would allow us to move forward in the quest for solutions in the framework of the Middle East peace process, in order to achieve a peaceful, just, negotiated and lasting solution, in accordance with international law, that takes into account the legitimate aspirations of both parties.

Throughout the open debates on the Middle East in which we have taken part, we have reiterated the vital need to protect civilians. Humanitarian assistance is critical in order to enable them to survive in the situations in which they find themselves; this is particularly crucial for the most vulnerable groups, such as women and children.

Also particularly pressing are the situations in Yemen, Iraq and Libya, where we are seeing a combination of political, security, economic and

humanitarian crises, with the potential of giving rise to truly disastrous situations if we do not take action immediately.

In Yemen, whose humanitarian crisis could become even worse than the one in Syria, is on the verge of famine, and the population continues to be the target of indiscriminate attacks against hospitals, schools and markets.

Finally, I should like to mention once again the conflict in Syria, the worst crisis of our time and one that requires greater efforts in order for it to be resolved peacefully. Well into the twenty-first century, we are still seeing chemical attacks, sieges, famines, the use of civilians as human shields, brutal public executions, forced displacement of the population, attacks against schools and hospitals, the recruitment of minors as soldiers and the destruction of the historical and cultural heritage of humankind, all of this met with frustrating inaction on the part of the Security Council.

We vigorously condemn the chemical attack that took place on 4 April in Khan Shaykun, and we trust that a complete, impartial and independent investigation can be carried out to identify those responsible for this war crime, so that its perpetrators can be brought to justice. We call upon all actors in this conflict to remain calm and not take any unilateral action outside of the United Nations that could endanger the possibility of reaching a peaceful solution to the crisis and stability in the region.

The most recent chapter in this string of horrors was written last Saturday, when, during the evacuation of Fo'ah and Kafraya, a brutal attack killed almost 130 people, half of them children. They were innocent civilians who, after suffering siege and hunger for many years, had hoped to begin a new life. In their memory and in that of the hundreds of thousands of people who have died in Syria and the millions of victims who have fled the conflicts in the Middle East, we reiterate that only a political negotiation can make it possible to reach the agreements necessary to ensure that, in the not-too-distant future, the region will no longer be synonymous with war, grief and devastation, but will gradually begin to see a more promising future.

Mr. Liu Jieyi (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I wish to thank Special Coordinator Mladenov for his briefing.

China has listened closely to the statements made by the representatives of Palestine and Israel. This year marks the seventieth anniversary of the adoption of General Assembly resolution 181 (II), on the partition plan for Palestine and Israel. Seventy years on, the Palestinian people are still seeing their legitimate rights and interests denied and continue to be subjected to unfair treatment, a situation that must be rectified without delay.

The Palestinian question remains at the heart of the Middle East issue and is of fundamental importance to the region. The latest developments on the ground are testimony to the fact that the Palestinian question, if left unresolved, will undermine security and stability in the region and beyond. In this connection, the international community should shoulder collectively the responsibility of defending the legitimate rights and interests of Palestine with a renewed sense of urgency. There is a pressing need for both Palestine and Israel to observe restraint and to take concrete action to revive the peace talks.

First and foremost, both parties should implement in earnest resolution 2334 (2016) by stemming the violence against civilians. Israel should cease settlement expansion, lift restrictions on humanitarian access to Gaza and demonstrate goodwill so as to enable renewed peace talks. Meanwhile, the legitimate security concerns of regional countries must also be respected and addressed.

Secondly, both Palestine and Israel should resume talks at the earliest opportunity and make strategic choices that serve the interests of their peoples. Resolving the question through peace talks is the best way to serve the interests of all parties. The use of force offers no solution. The earlier the talks resume, the sooner the peoples of both sides and of the wider region will benefit. Both parties should respect each other's right to statehood and survival. Talks must begin, and breakthroughs can be made along the way. Efforts should be made to achieve an early harvest of positive results and gradually to rebuild and strengthen confidence. It is crucial to sustain dialogue in preparation for a final and comprehensive solution. China supports efforts to resolve the question on the basis of, inter alia, the two-State solution, the Arab Peace Initiative, the principle of land for peace and relevant Security Council resolutions with a view to establishing a fully sovereign Palestinian State within the pre-1967 borders and with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Thirdly, we must build international consensus and engage all forces actively working to de-escalate the situation. China welcomes the fact that the League of Arab States, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and countries with influence are playing a more affirmative role and stepping up their efforts with respect to Palestine and Israel in order to consolidate the will for peace talks and to foster synergy. The lead role of the United Nations must be fully leveraged. Any outcome of such efforts should be endorsed by the Security Council.

Apart from the intractable question of Palestine, other hot-spot issues in the Middle East have also dragged on for years and defied solution, and are compounded by the rampant presence of terrorist forces, resulting in a dire peace and security situation in the region. The Middle East is now at a crossroads. It faces the risk of rising instability and at the same time raises hopes for peace. The countries of the region and the international community should work more rigorously to de-escalate tensions and seek a fundamental way forward.

First, we need to remain committed to dialogue and consultation and pursue a political settlement to hot-spot issues. The countries involved are unsurpassed in their knowledge of local realities and the underlying causes of conflict and tensions. The international community must fully respect their sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence, recognize and promote the political processes that they have led and own in a way that meets their aspirations to achieving a viable solution that accommodates the interests of all parties.

Secondly, all countries of the region and beyond must play a constructive role. The United Nations remains a main mediator of the Middle East peace process. Countries with influence inside and outside the region can give significant momentum towards peace. International cooperation must be coordinated in helping the countries concerned to build their capacities, working more with the conflicting parties and to settle differences peacefully through talks and negotiations. All parties should at all times remain true to the principles and purposes of the Charter of the United Nations and other basic norms governing international relations. Attempts to resolve conflicts by non-peaceful means are inadvisable.

Thirdly, we must strengthen our counter-terrorism campaigns. Terrorism is the common enemy of humankind and a venom spreading across the Middle East, to the detriment of efforts to restore peace and stability in the region. The international community should forge a united front against terrorism, make use of all means at its disposal and enhance cooperation in curbing the spread of terrorist materials via the Internet through exchanges of intelligence and law enforcement. We must cut off the channels of terrorist financing and arms supplies, block the spillover and back-flow of terrorist fighters, curtail the spread of terrorist ideologies, and root out the underlying drivers of terrorism.

China is well prepared to continue playing a constructive role, alongside the international community, in seeking a way out of the current conundrum in the Middle East so as to achieve peace and stability in the region and benefit its peoples.

Mr. Alemu (Ethiopia): I would like to thank you, Madam, for organizing this debate today. We shall attempt to respond to what I refer to as key questions in the concept paper (S/2017/305, annex). There are three, and I shall try to address them.

We are also grateful to Mr. Mladenov for his comprehensive briefing on the latest developments in the Middle East.We appreciate the humane sentiments that underpinned his presentation.

The peace and the security situation in that region remains a matter of serious concern because of its obvious grave implications for international peace and security. In the meantime, what we see is, as Mr. Mladenov stressed, the continued worsening of the humanitarian situation and the danger of chemical and biological weapons falling into the hands of terrorist groups. The fact that the overall trajectory is worrying cannot be gainsaid. It seems to us very easy in this regard to respond very quickly to the first question in the concept paper on who benefits from this state of affairs. It is those who believe that they benefit little from peace or the balance of normal life based on justice and fair play, and the the terrorists who are determined to undermine trust among peoples and religions.

There are no easy solutions to the multiple and complex challenges facing the Middle East region. However, the need for a comprehensive and holistic approach to addressing the multiple and complex challenges and threats facing the region has never been more urgent than at this particular point in time. In fact, developments taking place daily make it rather plain

that one would be delusional if one thought it were possible to see light at the end of the tunnel.

We often talk about how United Nations peacekeeping would fail without a political framework and a political strategy to guide it and to identify the end game. This problem is even more pronounced and more and more evident at the global level, including with respect to the situation in the Middle East, most particularly in this regard in connection with the Palestinian issue. It is impossible to question the claim that in all parts of the world, including the Middle East, it is not the primacy of politics but rather the military approach that has pride of place as the chosen means of resolving disputes, misunderstandings and conflicts.

This takes us very close to addressing the second key question in the concept paper, which asks what steps can be taken to identify and address threats to international peace and security. Obviously, as we have already the implied in the foregoing, the steps that have to be taken have to be political and diplomatic, based on justice and aimed at addressing the legitimate demands and concerns of all concerned. Very rare indeed are the instances, without denying exceptional circumstances, when the military approach has resulted in laying the foundation for durable and sustainable peace among States. This is all the more pertinent today when the devastating effects of war are making resort to it a threat of existential proportions.

Therefore, the answer to the second question it seems to ask is provided by the report of the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (see S/2015/446). This would mean that we should invest more in diplomacy and thus ensure the primacy of politics, which in fact is and should be the major vocation of the United Nations and the Security Council, which is supposed to be the tip of the spear for the world body in ensuring international peace and security.

This applies to all the difficult conflict situations in the Middle East. We do not believe that, given the presence of political will and an unambiguous commitment to a win-win outcome based on justice and security for all, it would be impossible to make progress with respect to any of the conflict situations in the Middle East and, for that matter, in our own region, the Horn of Africa. But honest dialogue has to be given priority. In that respect, it is critical that the Secretariat play its proper role by way of providing analyses of conflict situations as objectively as possible, without fear or favour. Differences in the interpretation of fact are unavoidable and more or less acceptable, but we cannot be allowed to have our own facts. That is one major impediment to the success of diplomatic efforts.

The answer to the last question speaks to the need for unity within the Security Council, most of all in isolating, marginalizing and defeating the enemies of peace, which requires an unambiguous commitment to the fight against terrorism. Perhaps Syria is the best example for doing more to create some clarity in connection with the end game, including with respect to the fight against terrorism. It seems to us that there is a need for major efforts in that area.

I would like to conclude by reiterating what we have always stressed — one cannot ignore the Palestinian issue. In that regard, no diplomatic effort will succeed in providing a sustainable solution unless the Palestinian conflict is addressed on the basis of the two-State solution. That is also critical for regional and international peace and security.

Mr. Seck (Senegal) (*spoke in French*): I would like to begin by thanking you, Madam President, for having convened today's debate, which enables us to address one of the most important items on the Security Council's agenda — the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question.

Let me also welcome today's briefer, Mr. Nickolay Mladenov, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General, who has just painted a grim picture of the region, including the unfortunate major negative trends destabilizing the heart of the Middle East and beyond.

Wars that are now being waged with sophisticated, but banned, weaponry, such as chemical weapons, have devastating effects that are felt as far as Africa. At the same time, sectarianism, intolerance and even religious discrimination continue to divide national communities that once lived peaceably together in many countries of the region. In addition, pernicious acts of terrorism and violent extremism continue to be perpetrated, very often by foreign terrorist fighters, throughout the world, including in North Africa, West Africa, Central Africa and East Africa. The spread of terrorism could worsen if terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State, Da'esh and the Al-Nusra Front are not defeated in Iraq and Syria and if they attempt to establish new strongholds in regions that are more clement. We must

examine those new threats so as to identify possible solutions to the various conflicts that plague the Middle East. I will mention but a few of them today.

Such threats have emerged to join the list of long-standing conflicts addressed by the Security Council, such as the Israeli-Arab conflict. We all agree that the Palestinian question remains relevant. There is no need for the Senegalese delegation to recap the facts already outlined by Mr. Mladenov. I would simply like to reaffirm our belief with regard to the need for a two-State solution, with Israel and Palestine living side by side in peace and security, within safe, internationally recognized borders, and with East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine. The Senegalese delegation would like to invite Israelis and Palestinians — who are the only parties capable giving peace a genuine chance — with the support of the international community, in particular the Security Council, the Quartet and the countries of the region, to make resolute efforts to apply international law and implement the relevant Security Council resolutions, including resolution 2334 (2016).

The Senegalese delegation welcomes the diplomatic efforts of several countries, such as France, Egypt, Jordan and the Russian Federation. It expresses high hopes for the success of efforts already under way and led by your country, Madam President. The observer of Palestine just mentioned that President Mahmoud Abbas will meet soon with President Trump. We also have high hopes for that meeting. In the same vein, we welcome the renewed focus on the Arab Peace Initiative during the most recent summit of the League of Arab States. It is an initiative that besides offering a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute based on the two-State solution, advocates overall peace among Israel and the countries of the region. It deserves our support.

My delegation encourages the steps being taken by the United Nations, in conjunction with the competent Palestinian authorities and the parties concerned, to find a solution to the recurring problems of supplying water, sanitation and electricity in Gaza, which continues to face the most challenging humanitarian and socioeconomic constraints. I would also like to welcome the launching on 22 February of the Palestine National Development Plan 2017-2022, which focuses on citizens, because the development dimension of the conflict is as important as the political and security dimensions.

It is our responsibility, first and foremost, as members of the Security Council, and the responsibility of the Quartet and of countries in the region, to identify and step up diplomatic efforts that foster a renewed spirit of sharing to ensure that, like the Israelis, Palestinians can have a viable, sovereign State, within safe and internationally recognized borders, and with — I repeat — East Jerusalem as its capital.

With regard to the Syrian conflict, which is entering its seventh year, Senegal reaffirms its solidarity with the Syrian people, who are broken and are facing immense destruction and desolation. That is why Senegal reiterates its unshakeable faith in a negotiated, comprehensive, political solution that considers all dimensions of the complex Syrian crisis, in particular on the basis of the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex) and resolution 2254 (2015). The return of peace in Syria should go hand in hand with the need to shed light on the allegations of the use of banned weapons, including chemical weapons, against civilians.

Similarly, my delegation encourages the Iraqi Government, with the support of the international coalition and other actors, to persevere in its efforts to defeat Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. The significant military victories won against that organization, particularly in Fallujah, combined with the remarkable advances that we are witnessing in Mosul, demonstrate that terrorism and its underlying ideology can be defeated.

In our view, the priority is the protection of civilians and national reconstruction, with particular attention paid to the specific needs of people who have suffered through two years of occupation, while also taking due account of the necessary reconciliation among the various factions of the country. I have no doubt that the United Nations, in particular the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, will continue to undertake activities that benefit the country with respect to three dimensions: the political, security and the humanitarian.

With regard to Yemen, we reaffirm our conviction that only a negotiated political solution between the parties, with due regard given to the legitimacy of the Yemeni Government, and taking into account the initiative of the Gulf Cooperation Council and its implementation mechanism, as well as the relevant Security Council resolutions, will lead to peace and stability in a country experiencing one of the worst

humanitarian disasters. Such a solution would also help to prevent terrorist organizations, such as Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb and the Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, from taking root.

It is by taking up those challenges, using a holistic approach based on justice and human rights, and by developing a clear political outlook, that we Council members will contribute to tackling terrorist and extremist groups and helping the Middle East to become a haven of stability, peace and security.

Mr. Cardi (Italy): Italy remains convinced that a just and lasting peace between Israel and Palestine needs to be based on a two-State solution, as the only achievable objective resulting from direct negotiations between the two parties. That is also consistent with the position that the European Union has held for years. In addition to the efforts by all relevant international actors, including those of the Special Coordinator and the Quartet, we have followed with optimism the latest attempt by the United States to reach out to the parties, which we trust can pave the way for concrete outcomes.

In that spirit, the positive involvement of regional actors is of paramount importance, as well as that of the rest of the international community. Against that background, we are open to considering new diplomatic schemes aimed at achieving a negotiated solution, provided that they remain within the boundaries of the Oslo framework.

However, constructive efforts could be derailed by unhelpful steps on the ground. Unilateral actions are to be avoided by all parties, if mutual confidence is to be restored. In the meantime, we strongly support all possible practical collaboration between the parties in areas such as access to water and energy, sanitation and security, in order to improve the living conditions of all Palestinians. In that context, we commend initiatives that are beneficial to all parties involved, such as the Red Sea-Dead Sea project.

Turning to the recent developments in Lebanon, Italy encourages the Lebanese authorities to keep working towards the consolidation of institutions and the economy. Following the election of President Aoun and the establishment of the new Government under Prime Minister Hariri, we encourage all Lebanese political parties to spare no effort to reach an agreement to hold parliamentary elections by the end of 2017. That will be a crucial step toward the restoration of the full functionality of State institutions. Let me recall the importance that Italy attaches to the full implementation of resolutions 1559 (2004) and 1701 (2006) by all parties in Lebanon, as a cornerstone for enduring national and regional stability.

The gradual process of the consolidation of Lebanese institutions still requires the full support of the international community, especially the active involvement of the United Nations. The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) is an example of how valuable the work of the United Nations in the Middle East can be. In times of widespread conflict, UNIFIL has managed to provide its area of operations with stability and security. Also, by enhancing interaction with the population through specific activities, UNIFIL has brought substantial calm to southern Lebanon, ensuring long-overdue tranquillity for Israel on its northern border.

Furthermore, as the Syrian conflict increased, UNIFIL and the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force have contributed to sheltering Israel and Lebanon from the war, and have proved to be a shield against the non-State actors active in the area, whose actions continue to pose a serious risk of escalation, particularly in the Syrian Golan. Averting such escalation must continue to be a key priority for the international community. That is especially supported by countries such as Italy that contribute to the manning of United Nations stabilization missions there.

Violence continues to plague Syria and cause tremendous suffering to the Syrian people. It is our collective responsibility to revitalize the chances for peace. In that regard, the Group of Seven (G-7) meetings last week, which was extended to some key regional stakeholders, were timely. On both occasions, which were convened by the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Italy, Mr. Al Fano, all countries conveyed a strong message of support for the political process and for the efforts of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General, Mr. Staffan de Mistura, calling for the swift implementation of resolution 2254 (2015).

At the G-7 meetings, efforts aimed at establishing a nationwide ceasefire were also welcomed, while concern was expressed at the violations of the ceasefire. An effective cessation of hostilities, as well as full humanitarian access, must remain our objective and our priority, as they feed into the Geneva process by creating an environment conducive to the political talks.

Accountability for gross and systematic violations committed in Syria is also crucial for preventing additional brutality and continued flouting of international norms. All those responsible for such breaches of international law will be held accountable in that framework. We fully support the investigation by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Fact-Finding Mission in the Syrian Arab Republic into the Khan Shaykhun attack, and we call upon the Syrian Government and all parties to cooperate fully with the OPCW so as to allow for the prompt conclusion of its investigation.

I would like to conclude with the mention of two issues that have a regional dimension: the fight against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Sham or Da'esh, and the plight of refugees and migrants.

Da'esh is on the defensive and is losing territory. However, two main challenges are now looming: stabilizing liberated areas, which is needed in order to prevent the resurgence of Da'esh, and countering the remaining threats of the transnational terrorist network, including the network of foreign terrorist fighters.

Finally, I turn to the issue of people on the move in the Middle East. Being at the forefront of the migration emergency in the Mediterranean Sea and deploying countless resources to provide migrants and refugees with life-saving assistance, Italy appreciates the immense efforts undertaken by countries in the region, such as Lebanon and Jordan, which bear the burden of hosting hundreds of thousands of refugees and which, consequently, need the unwavering support of the international community. Any solution intended to bring about sustainable peace in the Middle East will also need to address promptly and pragmatically the plight of those people, based on the two pillars of security and solidarity.

Mr. Aboulatta (Egypt) (*spoke in Arabic*): The Middle East is shaken by upheavals that are unprecedented in modern history. There are long-standing and escalating disputes.

We have spoken at length about the possibility of preventing the slide towards widespread chaos in the region. We have often warned of injustice against Arabs caused by foreign interference or the occupation of Arab territories in Palestine and Syria, saying that it could cause the situation to spiral out of control, but for decades those warnings have fallen on deaf ears. The situation is still unresolved, and the management of disputes has become an objective in itself without there being a real attempt to resolve the situation or to change the approach.

The item on today's agenda — "The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question" — has been on the Council's agenda for many years and is fraught with meaning. That should also help us identify points of reference. In fact, it reflects an awareness on the part of the international body in charge of maintaining international peace and security of the importance of the Palestinian question and its influence on the Middle East as a whole, as well as the implications of the situation in the Middle East for international peace and security. Indeed, despite the numerous conflicts that we have seen recently, the injustice towards the Palestinian people, who have been living without a State and under occupation for more than half a century, remains the oldest crisis, which reflects the dysfunction of the international regime when it comes to achieving justice in that critical region.

We must imagine the situation that has been ongoing for many years. The Palestinian people have lived without freedom and under colonization, their homes have been destroyed, and they remain trapped behind the separation wall in the West Bank or under siege in Gaza. We have to imagine the influence of those images on generations of young people who have lived like prisoners without a political horizon that would allow them at least to dream about a better future. The endless continuation of the Middle East question, without resolution, assaults the awareness of the international community when it contemplates its failure to achieve the necessary parameters for a solution that is in accordance with the international legal framework, international law, international humanitarian law and the Charter of the United Nations — the first Article of which draws attention to people's right to self-determination, an essential goal for which our international organization was created.

We also recall that, in the framework of the United Nations, we are not seeking any victory nor do we wish to call into question the legality of any State. We are also not seeking a solution that is logically unacceptable or illegal under international law. We must always remember that it is the Organization that approved the creation of the State of Israel. The recourse of the Palestinian people to the United Nations implies a commitment to a legal and peaceful solution and to achieving justice through the two-

State solution, which the international community believes appropriate — two States, an Israeli State and a Palestinian State reconciled in accordance with the choice of the people. The Palestinian people aspire to live in dignity in their homeland, and the Israeli people also want to live in security within the framework of good neighbourly relations in their own land. The two-State solution, pursuant to Security Council resolutions, the most recent being resolution 2234 (2016), calls for the 1967 borders, including East Jerusalem.

Some have tried to manage the Palestinian issue by providing assistance, perhaps because of an unfounded fear of dealing with the core issue and the mistaken belief that managing the conflict would be enough to assuage fears and satisfy the status quo. That approach of easing the suffering has lost its importance over the years. Maintaining the status quo can be regressive and eventually explosive. We have undoubtedly lost control of the situation.

That is Egypt's position. Our treaty with Israel constitutes the foundation for peace in the region and reflects our position. The Arab States are also aware of the situation, as has been reflected in their actions pursuant to the Arab Peace Initiative, which lays the basis for overall peace in the region. Thus, we invite all stakeholders to encourage that approach and to work assiduously on resolving the situation and restoring the rights of the Palestinian people. Those efforts must go beyond the occasional appeasement, which has lost its effect.

Lastly, I would like to reaffirm the appeal launched by Egypt, at the highest level, to the Palestinians and Israelis to return to the negotiating table and to give pride of place to serving the interests of their peoples. Negotiations remain the best way to resolve the conflict. We appreciate the commitment that we have seen recently from international players, including the friends of Israel, to achieving a comprehensive political solution with a view to ensuring justice and overall peace. Egypt will work with both Governments — Israeli and Palestinian — and with international forces in order to achieve that common objective, in keeping with the two-State solution and the principles of land for peace and international equality.

Mr. Llorentty Soliz (Plurinational State of Bolivia) (*spoke in Spanish*): Allow me at the outset to thank Mr. Nickolay Mladenov, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General, for this morning's briefing.

The causes of the conflict in the Middle East are difficult to define owing to its long-standing nature and complexity, but we will try to enumerate a few. The first cause is the unkept commitments of the Powers that occupied the Middle East under a mandate by the League of Nations after the First World War. The second cause is the implementation of regime-change policies. The third cause is the invasions in the region without the authorization of the Security Council and in violation of international law. Terrorism is, of course, another cause, as is the competition for natural resources.

Jordan's King Abdullah II, at the latest Arab Summit, held in his country a few days ago, also identified one of the causes of the tragic situation that the region is experiencing. He said that:

(*spoke in English*)

> "there will be no peace and stability in the Middle East without achieving a just and comprehensive solution to the question of Palestine, the core issue of the Middle East, based on the two-State solution".

(*spoke in Spanish*)

We also wish to echo the words of Pope Francis during a meeting with the accredited diplomatic corps in the Holy See: "No conflict can become a habit impossible to break." Israelis and Palestinians need peace. The entire Middle East urgently needs peace.

Similarly, on 29 November 2016, the Secretary-General said the following:

> "The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not just one of many conflicts in the region. It is in many ways a long-standing, gaping wound that has fed tension and conflict throughout the Middle East."

The Plurinational State of Bolivia comes to today's important open debate with the urgency of getting reliable, first-hand information that would update us on the implementation of resolution 2334 (2016), and once again, we are seeing acts that are undermining the long-desired two-State solution.

A few days ago, on Thursday, 30 March to be exact, the international community was informed of the decision of the Security Cabinet of Israel to build the first settlement in 20 years in the Emek Shilo zone, located in the occupied West Bank. Such repeated conduct on

the part of Israel defies the Security Council, whose views have been set forth in numerous resolutions since 1967, including resolution 2334 (2016), adopted on 23 December 2016, and is in flagrant violation of the demand that Israel immediately and completely cease settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem.

It can seem a bit redundant that every time we take up matters related to the situation in Palestine in this body, I go back to the almost 50 years of Israeli non-compliance with the unanimous demand of all peoples that it stop its expansionist and settlement activities. In these 50 years, the world has looked on, perplexed and helpless, as day after day a Government decides to act in collusion with purveyors of war against a population that only wants to exercise its human right to life and self-determination.

The States Members of the United Nations must focus on this situation and on the implementation of resolution 2334 (2016). We reiterate our request that the next quarterly report have a written format and contain in detail an assessment of the status of implementation of the resolution. Similarly, as we have done in the past, we reiterate the need for the report to be enriched with detailed maps of the Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory. We believe that it is an unavoidable responsibility of the members of the Security Council to act without delay to ensure that Israel cease its illegal settlement activities in occupied Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem, and refrain from acting against the Palestinian people, including the inhumane blockade of the Gaza Strip. The Government of Israel must show its political will and commitment to the two-State solution.

We agree with some of our colleagues at today's important meeting who have said that the two-State solution cannot and should not become the illusion of two States. It is absolutely clear that there is an occupying Power and an occupied territory, which is the big difference compared to other conflicts in the region. And that is why we have international law as well as General Assembly resolutions adopted on this matter, decisions of UNESCO, the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice and resolutions of this very Council. Bolivia naturally supports all the peace processes set up to resolve this issue in a political and negotiated way and through dialogue, and we support the framework of the Madrid principles and the Arab Peace Initiative, which contribute to the fulfilment of this objective.

The Plurinational State of Bolivia reaffirms its support for the self-determination of the Palestinian people and their right to have a free, sovereign and independent State, with pre-1967 international borders and with East Jerusalem as its capital, in accordance with the relevant resolutions of the Security Council and the General Assembly. It is crucial that the Council work not only to recognize but to guarantee the right of peoples to peace, the right of the Palestinian people to peace and the right of the Israeli people to peace.

The President: I wish to inform all concerned that we will be carrying on today's open debate right through the lunch hour, as we have a large number of speakers. I would also remind all speakers to limit their statements to no more than four minutes in order to enable the Council to carry out its work expeditiously. Delegations with lengthy statements are kindly requested to circulate their texts in writing and deliver a condensed version when speaking in the Chamber.

I now give the floor to the representative of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

Mr. Moncada (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) (*spoke in Spanish*): It is an honour for the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to take the floor on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) at this quarterly open debate on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question, a topic to which the 120 member States that comprise our Movement attach particular importance, especially today as we celebrate the sixty-second anniversary of the Afro-Asian Conference, held in Bandung, Indonesia, which laid the foundations for the creation of the NAM.

First of all, we would like to convey our gratitude to Mr. Nikolay Mladenov, Personal Representative of the Secretary-General and Special Coordinator for the United Nations for the Middle East Peace Process, for his valuable briefing.

During the seventeenth Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement, which took place in September 2016 on Margarita Island, Venezuela, the Heads of State and Government reaffirmed their abiding solidarity with the Palestinian people, as well as their unswerving support for their just cause, while calling on the member States of the Movement to renew their commitment and further strengthen and coordinate their efforts to promote the

realization of justice and the rights of the Palestinian people in the light of the prevailing critical situation and diminishing prospects for a peaceful solution.

In this regard, we stress that a just and lasting solution to the question of Palestine in all its aspects remains a priority on the NAM agenda. In addition, we reaffirm that the ongoing Israeli occupation and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as a whole continue to pose a serious threat to international peace and security. It requires urgent attention and remedy, in accordance with international law, relevant United Nations resolutions and, of course, the Charter of the United Nations itself. In this regard, NAM stands ready to contribute to the achievement of a just, lasting and peaceful solution, and we call for the intensification of international and regional efforts in support of this objective, while recalling the responsibilities of the Security Council and the General Assembly in this regard, including as most recently reaffirmed in resolution 2334 (2016), which set forth the essential requirements and parameters for achieving such a solution.

Resolution 2334 (2016) was strongly welcomed and endorsed by NAM in its communiqué dated 27 December 2016. The Non-Aligned Movement continues to call for the resolution to be respected and implemented, stressing that it remains central to redressing the situation on the ground, de-escalating tensions and fostering an appropriate environment for the pursuit of peace. In this regard, we welcome the first report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of resolution 2334 (2016), as orally delivered to the Security Council by Mr. Nikolay Mladenov (see S/PV.7908). However, we reiterate the need for a substantive written report to be presented in fulfilment of the Council's responsibilities and in support of its duties to advance the resolution's objectives, especially in the light of Israel's continued indifference towards the Security Council and its resolutions.

Our Movement expresses its grave concern at recent developments in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, in particular the continuation and escalation of illegal policies and measures by Israel, the occupying Power, aimed at expanding its illegal settlement campaign and further entrenching its half-century occupation since its invasion of Palestinian lands and its violation of the rights of the Palestinian people. Rather than cease its violations, reverse the negative trends on the ground and prove its commitment to the two-State solution on the basis of the 1967 lines, as demanded by the Security Council and the international community as a whole, Israel continues to act with contempt of the Council and in breach of its legal obligations.

In this regard, the States members of the Movement strongly condemn the recent provocative decisions of Israel, the occupying Power, to proceed with its settlement activities in grave breach of international law and in direct and deliberate violation of relevant United Nations resolutions, including resolution 2334 (2016). Moreover, we are alarmed by and deeply deplore the flagrant contempt of Israel, the occupying Power, for the unequivocal decision of the Security Council in that regard, which clearly reaffirmed that Israel's settlement activities have no legal validity and constitute flagrant violations under international law and which called on Israel to immediately and completely cease all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, and to fully respect all of its legal obligations, including under the Fourth Geneva Convention. The Movement further recalls the call by the Security Council for an end to all acts of violence against civilians, including acts of terror, as well as all acts of provocation, incitement and destruction.

Regarding Gaza, the situation remains of great concern to the Movement. The continuing obstruction of the reconstruction and the extremely slow pace of the recovery of Gaza, due to the ongoing illegal Israeli blockade, has forced thousands of families to remain displaced and homeless and prevented the rebuilding of vital infrastructure, gravely impacting humanitarian, socioeconomic, psychological and environmental conditions. We reiterate our call for the complete lifting of the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip, while also stressing that the crisis in Gaza must be comprehensively addressed, in accordance with international law, including humanitarian and human rights law, and relevant United Nations resolutions, in the context of the overall situation of the continuation of the illegitimate and belligerent Israeli foreign occupation of the Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, since 1967, and of the unequivocal calls for an end to this half-century occupation.

In addition, the Non-Aligned Movement reiterates that it condemns in the strongest terms Israel's systematic human rights violations against the Palestinian people, including, inter alia, the wilful killing and injury of civilians, including peaceful protesters; violent military

raids, including, in particular, in refugee camps, terrorizing the civilian population; the imprisonment and detention of thousands of Palestinian civilians, including children and women; the confiscation of land and property and the demolition of Palestinian homes; the forced displacement of Palestinians, particularly Bedouin communities; and settler terrorism and violence against Palestinian civilians. We remind the Council of its duties in this regard.

The Non-Aligned Movement reiterates its calls for strengthening international efforts aimed at achieving without delay an end to the Israeli occupation that began in 1967 and a just, lasting, comprehensive and peaceful solution, and reiterates its readiness to cooperate and support all relevant efforts, in line with the decisions taken during the seventeenth Summit on the Island of Margarita, which declared 2017 as the International Year to end the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

The States members of the Movement also condemn in the strongest possible terms the acts of aggression committed by Israel against the Syrian Arab Republic on 17 March and considers such acts a grave violation of Syrian sovereignty and a breach of international law, of the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, and of the Agreement on Disengagement between Israeli and Syrian Forces of 1974. In this regard, we request the Security Council to shoulder its responsibility by clearly condemning those acts of aggression and taking the necessary measures to prevent its recurrence, and holding Israel accountable for threatening regional and international peace and security.

In conclusion, the Non-Aligned Movement reiterates its condemnation of all measures taken by Israel, the occupying Power, to alter the legal, physical and demographic status of the occupied Syrian Golan. In this regard and in line with our principled position, we demand once again that Israel abide by resolution 497 (1981) and withdraw fully from the occupied Syrian Golan to the borders of 4 June 1967, in accordance with resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973).

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Lebanon.

Mr. Salam (Lebanon): I am sure that you, Madam President, and all members of the Council would agree with me that we in the Chamber all share the same frustration of having the Palestinian question agenda item discussed every three months. We all wish that this item, the oldest and still ever present on the agenda of this body since the creation of the United Nations, were taken out, had a just and durable settlement to the Middle East conflict been achieved and implemented, based on the numerous resolutions adopted by the Council and in particular the principle of land for peace.

Unfortunately, it must be recognized that such a prospect keeps slipping away, and consequently the Palestinian question keeps rooting itself deep in the agenda of this body. Indeed, how can a just and durable solution be achieved and an independent, viable and contiguous Palestinian State emerge when, first, the construction of 6,000 new Israeli units in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem has been approved by Israel since the beginning of the year; secondly, a law retroactively legalizing settlements built on the occupied Palestinian territory was adopted last February; and, thirdly, when only a few weeks ago Israel approved the construction of a whole new settlement site?

Last January, during a debate on preventive diplomacy (see S/PV.7857), my delegation reminded the Council of Lebanon's initiative in 2016 to seek, based on the Charter of the United Nations and operative paragraph 10 of resolution 1701 (2006), the good offices of the Secretary-General in the delineation of the disputed maritime border and exclusive economic zone between Lebanon and Israel, emphasizing that the non-resolution of that issue shall remain a source of conflict that threatens peace and security in our region. And while we were looking forward to receiving, in this regard, an update on the results of the efforts of the Special Coordinator for Lebanon, Israel, in utter defiance of international law and in a clear attempt to undermine the Secretary-General's good offices, threatened, in a letter dated 2 February, that it would "not allow" what it referred to as

> "unauthorized economic activities, including, inter alia, the granting of rights by another State to any third party; exploratory activities, drilling or exploration of natural resources in maritime areas in which Israel asserts sovereign rights and jurisdiction".

In a letter to the Secretary-General, my Government responded to these threats by reiterating Lebanon's long-standing commitment to international law and in particular to the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea regarding the delimitation of maritime borders.

However, these were not the only Israeli threats against my country, as only few weeks later, Naftali Bennett, Israel's Minister of Education, threatened, in an interview with Haaretz on 3 March, to launch "a massive attack on the civilian infrastructure along with additional air and ground action" targeting "the Lebanese institutions, its infrastructure, airport, power stations, traffic junctions" along "Lebanese army bases" with the aim of "returning Lebanon to the Middle Ages". The least one can say is that those are despicable words. Nothing is more barbaric than threatening civilians. As to the outrageous threat to return Lebanon to the Middle Ages, the only thing it is reminiscent of is the darkness of the Middle Ages.

With all these threats, and Israel's continued violations of my country's sovereignty, documented and recorded in numerous letters addressed by my mission to the Security Council, I would now like to ask if it is not high time for the Council to condemn those actions as blatant and deliberate violations of the Charter of the United Nations, the basic rules and principles of international law and humanitarian law and the relevant United Nations resolutions. But my Government remains firmly committed to implementing resolution 1701 (2006) in its entirety and urges the Council, one more time, to show leadership and compel Israel to abide by its clear obligations under that resolution.

Lastly, do I need to remind the Council that Lebanon has been commended for fighting terrorism? I would like to thank your Government, Madam President, along with many others represented on the Council, for their greatly appreciated commitment to supporting my country and strengthening our army's ability to address the multiple challenges that it is now facing, ranging from combating terrorism to maintaining stability and safeguarding Lebanon's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Jordan.

Ms. Bahous (Jordan) (*spoke in Arabic*): I would like to thank the President for her capable leadership and presidency of the Council this month. I would also like to thank Mr. Nickolay Mladenov, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, for his comprehensive briefing.

I am pleased to be addressing the Council today on behalf of my own country, Jordan, and of the Group of Arab States, since Jordan is currently presiding over the twenty-eighth session of the Arab Summit.

Today's open debate is taking place in the wake of the holding at the end of last month in Amman of the Arab Summit, which released a message of peace that stresses that Arabs want only peace and a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as outlined in the Arab Peace Initiative, adopted by the Arab groups at the Beirut Summit of 2002 and supported by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. It remains the best and most comprehensive plan for achieving a historic reconciliation between the two countries based on Israel's withdrawal from all the occupied Arab and Palestinian territories to the lines of 4 June 1967. It addresses all the final-status issues and can help to ensure stability in the Arab world. The message of the Summit is another piece of proof that Arabs believe in comprehensive and lasting peace as a strategic solution. It should be met with a genuine expression of a desire for peace on the part of Israel, the occupying Power.

We would like to emphasize our support for the outcomes of the Middle East Peace Conference, held in Paris on 15 January, which renewed the international community's commitment to a two-State solution as the only way to achieve a lasting peace. We underline our total rejection of unilateral Israeli measures aimed at altering the reality on the ground and ending the possibility of a two-State solution. We call on Israel to implement the various legitimate international instruments, of which the most recent is resolution 2334 (2016), which calls for halting all settlement activities and ensuring peace between Palestinians and Israelis.

The international community must realize that the region will never know peace and stability until the Israeli occupation is ended and the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people — to establish an independent, sovereign and viable State on Palestinian national soil within the borders of 4 June 1967 and with East Jerusalem as its capital — are met. The Palestinian cause is key to stability in the region and beyond, and ending the injustices that have been inflicted on our brotherly people of Palestine continues to be a global moral obligation. We emphasize our rejection of all of Israel's violations and the steps it has taken to change the historical and legal situation in East Jerusalem, as well as in Christian and Muslim holy places in occupied Jerusalem.

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is the Custodian and sponsor of Muslim and Christian holy places in East Jerusalem, and we will therefore continue to shoulder our historical and religious responsibility for them, especially the Al-Aqsa Mosque and Al-Haram Al-Sharif. From this Chamber, we call for the implementation of all Security Council resolutions on Jerusalem, especially resolutions 252 (1968), 267 (1969), 465 (1980) and 478 (1980), which deem null and void all Israeli steps taken to change the status and identity of East Jerusalem. We urge the States of the world not to move their embassies to Jerusalem or acknowledge it as the capital of Israel, because imposing a new geopolitical reality on Jerusalem would have enormous repercussions for the effort to achieve peace and put the region at risk of an explosion that would have unpredictable consequences.

The current situation in Syria cannot take any more postponements and crisis management. It is high time that we took wise decisions and established implementable common frameworks that in turn reflect the will of the States and peoples of the region to reach lasting and comprehensive solutions to the crisis. We therefore emphasize once again the principled position we have held since the start of the Syrian crisis, which is that only a political settlement that meets the Syrian people's aspirations and protects the country's sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity can ensure a prosperous and stable future for Syria.

We should continue to move forward with the Geneva negotiations, based on the Geneva communiqué of 30 June 2012 (S/2012/522, annex) and the relevant Security Council resolutions, in order to start making the four baskets of the transitional political process a reality on the ground. We would like to emphasize the importance of the Astana talks in ensuring a comprehensive ceasefire in Syria. We also want to urge the international community to share the burden being carried by the States that are hosting Syrian refugees, especially Syria's neighbours, by increasing financial support to them so that they can continue to provide the services that refugees need, such as training them and teaching them skills so that they can contribute effectively to Syria's reconstruction when the conflict is over.

We stress our full support to the brotherly country of Iraq in its efforts to eradicate terrorist gangs and liberate Mosul from the Islamic State in Iraq and the Sham. We hope that the international community continues to support Iraq in its efforts to enable stability to take hold in its liberated areas and achieve national reconciliation through an inclusive political process that leaves no one behind. We also support the efforts of the Arab coalition in support of legitimacy in Yemen to end the crisis in that country, based on the Gulf Initiative and its implementation mechanisms, the outcomes of the national dialogue conference and resolution 2216 (2015). It is essential that security and political stability be achieved in Libya and its legitimate institutions given support. And we emphasize our support to Somalia in its efforts to rebuild and combat terrorism.

We are deeply concerned about the growing phenomenon of Islamophobia and the attempts to link tolerant Islam to terrorism. We warn that such attempts only serve the terrorist organizations and their lies, which have nothing to do with Islam and its tolerance. Terrorism is a scourge that must be uprooted through an inclusive approach in order to protect our people, defend our security and ensure respect for life.

We want to emphasize that we are making efforts to build good-neighbourly and cooperative relations with the States neighbouring the Arab world. However, we reject any attempt to intervene in our internal affairs and condemn any attempt to destabilize our region, feed sectarian strife and fuel conflicts. Those practices violate good-neighbourliness, the rules of international relations, the provisions of international law, and the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations. True progress in solving the crisis and ensuring security in the region hinges strongly on sustainable development, and serious reforms must be undertaken to promote education, human rights, citizenship, equality and women's empowerment.

If we succeed in those efforts and ensure cooperation among the various spheres, namely, security, sustainable development and human rights, that will definitely shield our society against racial and discriminatory practices and meet the aspirations of our people to live in a secure and stable region. We continue to stress certain factors, above all, empowering youth, ensuring their education, providing them with skills and increasing their self-confidence so that they become positive actors in their society and contribute to solving conflicts and to protecting and building peace, instead of being attracted by obscurantist and extremist ideologies. We cannot deny that those ideologies target our youth, who are the cornerstone of our present and future.

In conclusion, I thank and commend our international partners for their support in ensuring peace and security in the Middle East. We stand ready to continue to work in cooperation with those who seek to find effective solutions to the crisis and to build on our common ground through more coordinated and collective efforts, which should meet our common objectives and interests to achieve stability, security and prosperity in the Middle East.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Liechtenstein.

Mr. Wenaweser (Liechtenstein): I thank you, Madam President, for this opportunity to speak in this open debate on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question. The Council needs to address a number of critical issues under this agenda item. The prospects for a two-State solution in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict seem to be fading, and hard-won security gains for both sides are in jeopardy while settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territories continue. Those settlements are illegal, in particular under the Geneva Conventions, and the Council has expressed itself accordingly in its resolution 2334 (2016).

Liechtenstein shares the concern of many that we are currently moving further away from a peaceful settlement of the conflict. We call on all involved to fully respect the international legal framework, including the one established by the Security Council, and to recommit to the two-State solution as the only viable and sustainable avenue to peace in the region.

The crisis in Syria has again occupied the Council throughout this month, once again without result, unfortunately, for the people of Syria, who continue to suffer mass atrocities in plain sight. The inability of the Council to put an end to those atrocities, let alone to provide some form of accountability, are in stark contravention to its designated role to maintain international peace and security, with particular responsibilities bestowed upon the five permanent members. But the failure of the Council to act, which comes at the expense of the Syrian people, also constitutes a serious political and institutional challenge for the United Nations. Recent efforts, notably among the Council's elected Members, to bridge the political divide are a welcome effort to help restore the functionality of the Council, so far, unfortunately, without any tangible results.

By signing the Accountability, Coherence and Accountability code of conduct regarding Security Council action against genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes, 112 States, including a majority of the Council members, have committed to preventing and ending mass atrocity crimes. The Council was, however, unable to formulate any response when one of the oldest and strongest norms of warfare was repeatedly violated — the absolute prohibition against the use of chemical weapons at all times and in all circumstances — not to speak of the many other instances of well-documented war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria. Liechtenstein will continue its advocacy to broaden support for and strengthen the implementation of the Code, which we consider to be an important contribution to the Secretary-General's effort to put prevention at the centre of the United Nations.

Since its beginning, the Syrian conflict has been characterized by pervasive impunity, and such impunity continues to fuel it. Within the United Nations membership and among civil society there is a growing momentum towards — finally — ensuring accountability for the crimes committed in Syria. The General Assembly has shown resolve by creating, on 21 December 2016, an accountability mechanism for Syria, the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Those Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011. The need for such a mechanism was illustrated even more forcefully last week when yet another draft resolution on Syria failed to be adopted because of a veto. The "Triple IM" offers the only promising path towards accountability for the crimes committed and towards justice for the Syrian people and a sustainable peace for the country. We call on all States to continue their political and financial support for the Mechanism.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Morocco.

Mr. Laassel (Morocco) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, I should like to congratulate you, Madam President, on your assumption of the presidency of the Security Council this month. I thank you for organizing this open debate on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question, and Mr. Nickolay Mladenov, Special Coordinator for the Middle East

Peace Process and the Personal Representative of the Secretary-General, for his excellent briefing.

The Kingdom of Morocco associates itself with the statement delivered by the representative of the Kingdom of Jordan on behalf of the Group of Arab States.

The international situation has been characterized recently by events that have unfolded at incredible speed and have had a very deleterious impact on the Palestinian question, which is the main issue for our region. The negotiations for a settlement have been experiencing a real crisis. Under the auspices of the United States of America, the negotiations have been at an impasse since 2014, and the prospects are particularly bleak. The situation is blocked, and the Israeli policy of settlement expansion has continued on Palestinian lands occupied since 1967.

In that context, the two-State solution is in serious danger, and the negotiations could collapse. That is why the major Powers in the Arab world and the friends of peace, including the Kingdom of Morocco, have tried, through the Al-Quds Committee, chaired by His Majesty King Mohammed VI, to present an Arab initiative to put an end to the occupation. We have also made every effort to promote peace and to uphold international law. Indeed, settlement expansion prevents concrete progress in achieving a two-State solution, and that has been the case even after the adoption of resolution 2334 (2016) last December, which Morocco welcomed.

It is no secret that Jerusalem is extremely important, not only for its inhabitants, but for all the believers of the three monotheistic religions. That is why the city should remain a symbol of tolerance. At one time, 1.5 billion Muslims used to turn to Jerusalem to pray before turning to Mecca. Moreover, it is the third holiest site for Muslims.

It is regrettable that breaches of international law, in particular in connection with Jerusalem, have generated such hatred and contributed to the terrorism that we know today. Under the auspices of His Majesty Mohammed VI, the Chair of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation's Jerusalem Committee, the Kingdom of Morocco has been working to ensure that the rights of the Palestinian people are upheld, chief among which is the right to establish a State with Jerusalem as its capital, as that is the only way to achieve peace in the Middle East and strengthen international peace and security. On many occasions, in both bilateral and multilateral frameworks, His Majesty Mohammed VI has called for an end to the colonization and Judaization of Jerusalem. He has also called for implementing the various initiatives that would enable the establishment of a Palestinian State within the 4 June 1967 borders, with the two States living side-by-side in peace.

In that regard, the international community must fully assume its responsibilities and end the current freeze in the negotiations between the Palestinians and Israelis, which has resulted, to date, only in a regressive situation marked by previously unseen levels of violence. We must restart the initiative, and there must be a genuine willingness on the part of the Palestinians and Israelis to return to the negotiating table and work for the two-State solution, which should be realized within the framework of the 4 June 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine. The various parties must come together armed with the best intentions possible so that there is a return to a feeling of trust and that the Palestine State can be viable within the international legal framework.

Lastly, the Moroccan position is well known. We support the Arab Peace Initiative and, above all, the principles of international law for the establishment of a Palestinian State with East Jerusalem as its capital within the 4 June 1967 borders that would live alongside Israel in peace. As we have always done, we will spare no effort to push ahead on the path to peace so as to reach a settlement that will lead to peace and security in the entire region.

Mr. Vieira (Brazil): As the Middle East continues to be plagued by an array of ever-more daunting and interconnected challenges, let me stress that we continue to follow the very worrying developments pertaining to the question of Palestine, which cannot and will not become another forgotten issue on the international agenda. We are deeply concerned by the approval of what is known as the regularization law, as well as the Israeli decision to build a new settlement in the occupied West Bank for the first time in decades. We join Secretary-General António Guterres in regretting those measures, which constitute additional impediments to the peace process. As the Council reaffirmed most recently in resolution 2334 (2016), all settlement activities are illegal under international law and represent one of the main obstacles to peace between Israel and Palestine.

Brazil has consistently advocated for the effective implementation of the two-State solution. At the heart

of that formula is the need to end the occupation and work towards a Palestinian State that is fully sovereign, economically viable and territorially contiguous, existing side by side with Israel in peace and security within internationally recognized borders based on the 1967 lines. We therefore urge the parties and those with an influence over them to seek a constructive political environment conducive to a return to meaningful negotiations.

The conflict in Syria continues to generate harrowing developments, some of which have recently been brought to the attention of the Council. Brazil condemns in the strongest terms any use of chemical weapons by any actor and under any circumstances. We therefore expressed alarm and the utmost concern upon receiving reports of the possible use of chemical weapons in Khan Shaykhun, in Idlib province. Those allegations must be subject to an international, impartial and comprehensive investigation, which should lead to holding those involved accountable.

We also express our concern about the military escalation in Syria. We are convinced that the key to ending the horrific bloodshed in Syria lies in the pursuit of effective dialogue among the key actors, as well as in full respect for the Charter of the United Nations and the relevant international law under the clear mandate of the Security Council. Effective dialogue is also needed in the Council itself. We call upon the permanent members to persevere in their efforts to find common ground. Their cooperation is an essential aspect of the search for a political solution in Syria. It is also key to enhancing humanitarian access and addressing the threat of terrorism. In that connection, we also praise the efforts of some elected members of the Council to bridge gaps and foster greater cooperation on that fundamental issue.

The long-awaited resumption of the intra-Syrian political negotiations in Geneva has enabled modest progress with regard to the four key issues of governance, elections, the Constitution and security. We renew our full support for the tireless efforts of Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura. It is time for the entire international community to send a unified message in support of an inclusive political solution to the Syrian crisis based on the parameters set forth in resolution 2254 (2015).

While acknowledging that the current ceasefire may be under pressure, we underscore the importance of the Astana process in reducing tensions and fostering conditions for the continuation of the Geneva talks. We commend the role played by the guarantor countries of Russia, Turkey and Iran, as well as the host country, Kazakhstan.

The humanitarian dimensions of the crisis should never be neglected. Brazil has continued to welcome refugees affected by the conflict since 2013 and recently donated a large shipment of medicine and health supplies to the World Health Organization in Syria. At the recent Brussels Conference on the future of Syria, we expressed our support for concrete actions aimed at mitigating the plight of Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries, such as Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey.

Regarding Lebanon, we take note of the results of the strategic review of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon conducted by the Secretariat and submitted last month to the Council. In that regard, we emphasize the vital role played by that mission and its Maritime Task Force in stabilizing a highly volatile region.

Brazil reiterates its steadfast support to the Government and the people of Lebanon on the road towards stability and development.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Pakistan.

Mr. Munir (Pakistan): We thank Special Representative Nickolay Mladenov for his briefing. As the Special Representative said earlier, the prospects for peace in the Middle East remain grim. Central to that sobering assessment is the plight of the Palestinian people, who, for the past 70 years, have suffered dispossession, displacement and deprivation at the hands of the Israeli occupation. Israel continues to defy the international consensus with impunity, while persisting with its illegal occupation of the Palestinian territory.

The settlement of the Palestinian issue is central to lasting peace and stability in the Middle East — not its incidental by-product — and the illegal Israeli settlements lie at the heart of the matter. In adopting resolution 2334 (2016), the Security Council sent an unequivocal signal to Israel that the settlements in occupied Palestinian territory have no legal validity and remain the major stumbling block to achieving a just and comprehensive peace in the Middle East. Unfortunately, that resolution has been disparaged by some as representative of the old bias on the part of the United Nations against Israel. We have heard

that familiar refrain all too often. However, it cannot absolve Israel from its international obligations.

The Israeli decision to construct new settlements in the West Bank is yet another dangerous provocation. The so-called legalization bill aims to provide a veneer of legality to an act that is internationally recognized as illegal. Meanwhile, the blockade of the Gaza strip continues in its tenth year. Such inhumane acts must end. Human suffering cannot be mortgaged to political ends.

It is our firm conviction that a viable, independent and contiguous State of Palestine, on the basis of internationally agreed parameters, with the borders of 1967, and with Al-Quds Al-Sharif as its capital, is the only sustainable guarantee for enduring peace in the Middle East. It is the strength of peace and not the threat of force that offers the best hope for arresting the rising tide of extremism in the region.

The seething fires of conflict in Syria rage with unspeakable fury. The scale of human suffering in Syria cannot be quantified in mere statistics. The road to peace in Syria is through an inclusive, Syrian-led and Syrian-driven process of political reconciliation. That road must respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria. Those who seek military ends threaten to extinguish any such hope.

In Iraq, as Iraqi forces consolidate their gains against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and its affiliates, we are confident that the foundations of a strong Iraqi State will be laid on the basis of an inclusive vision that recognizes and reconciles the interests of all Iraqi people.

With 7 million people facing the threat of famine, the conflict in Yemen has become a humanitarian catastrophe. A massive humanitarian response must complement the political process. The forthcoming High-level Pledging Event for the Humanitarian Crisis in Yemen, to be held in Geneva on 25 April, will provide an ideal opportunity to recalibrate our commitments and ensure that they are commensurate with the needs of the Yemeni people. In a spirit of solidarity with our Yemeni brothers and sisters, my country has already contributed $1 million of wheat in order to address immediate needs.

Pakistan lends its support to all diplomatic efforts to achieve peace and stability in the Middle East. We are confident that well-intentioned efforts on the part of the international community will restore the cradle of civilization to its rightful place as the beating heart of humankind.

Mr. Khoshroo (Islamic Republic of Iran): My delegation welcomes the opportunity to discuss the question of Palestine as the centre of all conflicts in the Middle East during the quarterly open debate of the Security Council. We thank Special Representative of the Secretary-General Maldenov for his briefing.

I align myself with the statement made by the representative of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement.

The Israeli occupation has long been at the centre of international discussions on Palestine in the Middle East. By blaming all others but the occupying Power, the United States seeks to erase the question rather than address it. The United States and the Israeli regime want to remove the Palestinian issue, which is central to all of the conflicts in the Middle East that these open debates focus on. The United States and Israel do not like the reports of the United Nations that document and expose Israeli apartheid and inhumane policies to the world. When the latest report was presented, they reacted by pushing for the report's withdrawal and proudly forcing the resignation of its author.

Today, we heard unsubstantiated allegations against my country, which I categorically reject as part of a misleading propaganda campaign against Iran and its role in the region, designed and perpetrated hysterically by Israel and certain countries in the region, including those that fully supported Saddam Hussein's aggression against Iran.

The Israeli regime's record is full of aggression against its neighbours, including other countries in the Middle East and beyond. We can count at least 14 instances of that since 1948. Israel continues to flout all international regimes governing weapons of mass destruction by refusing to adhere to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and the Chemical and the Biological Weapons Conventions. It is the only obstacle in the way of establishing a zone free of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East. Indeed, nuclear weapons in the hands of the Israeli regime pose the most serious threat to the security of all States in the Middle East and to the global non-proliferation regime, for which the Security Council is primarily responsible.

The Israeli regime has flagrantly violated at least 86 of the resolutions adopted by the Security Council in response to the Israeli regime's repeated acts of aggression and illegal occupation. One can also cite its well-documented atrocities, apartheid policies and war crimes against the Palestinian people. Its violations started with resolution 54 (1948) and, so far, have extended to resolution 2334 (2016) on illegal settlement activities. The regime enjoys total impunity.

The tragedy in Khan Shaykhun took place after the Government of Syria had been verifiably disarmed of all of its chemical weapons by the United Nations; the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and the Al-Nusra Front were not. The military action launched by the United States against Syria happened without any verification — either independent or by the United Nations. The attack was a clear act of aggression against a Member State and a violation of the Charter of the United Nations and international law. Such pointless misadventures only serve to send the clear and catastrophic message to the terrorists that if they repeat their atrocities, such as the one carried out on 4 April, they will be rewarded with retaliation against the Government by the United States. They did it again in Al-Rashidin on 15 April, when at least 126 people, many of them children, were killed. Where is the accountability for the perpetrators, organizers, financiers and sponsors of such shameful acts? Such acts kill the innocent and spoil the Astana process.

In general, the world, and particularly the Middle East, is still paying for the catastrophic unilateralism of the past, which has been premised on self-serving allegations. The world should not forget the events and the allegations of weapons of mass destruction in 2003 in Iraq and the consequences of those allegations, which now include the formation of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, which continues to burden the world. It has helped the terrorists and has destabilized the whole region. Surprisingly enough, those who destabilized the region and helped the emergence of terrorist groups are now bashing Iran, which has played a big role in containing and combating such global terror networks. Those familiar with history know that peace cannot be sustained without justice. Proudly introducing a sheriff's approach into the work of the United Nations means relying on destructive power as the only option. That will lead to nowhere but to a continued cycle of violence.

Accepting such a reckless and dangerous approach would endanger all of the founding principles of the United Nations, multilateral diplomacy and its undeniable achievements for humanity and the international community.

The President: I now give the floor to the Vice-Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian people.

Mr. Gertze: On behalf of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, I wish to thank the United States for the opportunity to address the Security Council on the issue of the long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has, at its heart, the need to address the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, including their right to self-determination.

It is clear that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains among the primary threats to international peace and security. It presents a litmus test for the credibility of the United Nations, including the Council. Indeed, while the decade-long blockade in Gaza shows no sign of ending, this year marks 70 years since General Assembly resolution 181 (II) partitioned the Mandate for Palestine into two States. It also marks 50 years of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. But the passage of time has not diminished either the gravity or the urgency of resolving the issue. How many more generations of Palestinians and Israelis must pay the price of the occupation, and at what point will we say "enough"?

The status quo is unsustainable and urgent steps are needed to reverse negative trends on the ground, which are eroding the two-State solution based on the 1967 lines that this Council has endorsed and which constitutes the only viable path for Palestinians and Israelis to realize their national aspirations in line with international law. The Committee notes the ongoing efforts by Egypt, France, Jordan, the Russian Federation, the United States and other Member States, as well as the reiteration by the League of Arab States, most recently at the Arab Summit in Amman, of its Peace Initiative to resolve the question of Palestine. It emphasizes that any new efforts should maintain the two-State solution.

In order to stand the test of time, any viable solution will require a just peace: a set of conditions under which Palestinians and Israelis can live side by side, in peaceful coexistence, inside secure borders and

in charge of their own destiny. Those conditions require respect for basic human rights — the right to live in dignity with the freedoms of movement and expression. The use of force or violence of any type, by anyone, or its incitement, has no role in the search for peace and must be rejected. The Committee also believes in the utmost imperative of achieving intra-Palestinian unity.

The Committee reiterates the international consensus that the illegal settlements in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, are a major obstacle to the attainment of a just peace on the basis of the two-State solution. The announcement on 31 March by the Government of Israel of the construction of the Emek Shilo settlement deep inside the West Bank, the first new settlement in the West Bank in two decades, can only be seen as blatant defiance of United Nations resolutions and disregard for international law. The Committee notes with regret the spike in illegal settlements and other activities cited in the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of resolution 2334 (2016) (see S/PV.7908) and expresses its expectation that future reports will be in a written format and include recommendations that will, inter alia, hold to account those who violate the resolution and compel compliance with its provisions.

The Committee would also like to draw the Council's attention to the shrinking space for human rights defenders in the occupied Palestinian territory, including access restrictions imposed on Israeli citizens who speak in favour of peace, as reported by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967 (see A/71/554). Given the continuing forced transfers, including of Bedouins, evictions, demolitions and the obstruction of humanitarian assistance in the occupied territory, the Committee calls upon Israel to meet its obligations as an occupying Power and to desist from imposing demographic changes on the occupied Palestinian territory.

Other current issues requiring the Council's imminent attention should not eclipse the urgency to resolve the question of Palestine and its occupation. General Assembly resolution 71/23 states that:

> "achieving a just, lasting and comprehensive settlement of the question of Palestine ... is imperative for the attainment of comprehensive and lasting peace and stability in the Middle East" (*resolution 71/23, ninth preambular para.*)

The overwhelming support demonstrated by the United Nations membership for efforts to realize the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people has been echoed during the course of all Committee activities, most recently during the round table on the question of Palestine, in February in Managua, with members of the Palestinian diaspora in Central and South America.

In this fiftieth year of the illegal occupation, we owe a just peace in Palestine not only to the Palestinian people, but to our own citizens and to future generations.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Peru.

Mr. Meza-Cuadra (Peru) (*spoke in Spanish*): I welcome the convening of this quarterly open debate on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question, and thank Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Nickolay Mladenov for his briefing.

We are deeply concerned over the continuing deterioration of the situation on the ground and call on all stakeholders to take moderate steps towards constructive dialogue, based on respect for international law and international humanitarian law. Peru encourages any initiative on the part of the international community aimed at finding a solution to the question of Palestine, such as the outcome document of the recent Paris conference on peace in the Middle East, which reflected international support for the two-State solution and the Quartet's recommendations.

Given the broad consensus that the status quo is unsustainable, strengthened efforts are urgently needed to achieve and maintain peace. The United Nations, in particular the Security Council, must at least facilitate the framework of an understanding to ensure the resumption of direct negotiations between the parties. Since 1947, when Peru became a member of the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine, we have clearly and consistently maintained our position towards implementation of General Assembly resolution 181(II). We support the solution of two States, living side by side within secure and recognized borders. We therefore underscore the importance of compliance with Security Council resolution 2334 (2016), adopted last December, which is equally firm against the acquisition of territory by force and any act of provocation or incitement to violence or destruction, regardless of its origin.

We reiterate our appeal for an immediate cessation of settlement activities, home demolitions and evictions in the occupied Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem. We condemn the continued launching of missiles and the commission of terrorist acts and other acts of violence against the population. We recognize Israel's inalienable right to safeguard its security and existence, including through legitimate defence, but we stress that such action must accord with the principles of proportionality and legality.

Furthermore, we reiterate our resounding condemnation of the crime of all crimes against humanity, as witnessed in the recent use of chemical weapons in Syria against the civilian population. We are concerned over the persistent conflict in that country and its devastating impact on the Syrian population and have appealed to the members of the Council to overcome their differences and take effective action, as they did, for example, with the unanimous adoption of resolution 2254 (2015), which established the foundation for dialogue among the Syrian parties, with the aim of achieving a political solution.

In addition, we urge the permanent members of the Council, in accordance with the code of conduct prepared by the Accountability, Coherence and Transparency Group, of which we are a member, and the France-Mexico initiative, to abstain from using the veto in cases of genocide, crimes against humanity, or flagrant violations of human rights or international humanitarian law.

Finally, Peru considers it an urgent matter for the Geneva and Astana talks to resume, in order to ensure a definitive end to the hostilities in Syria. We firmly support the efforts to that end on the part of the Organization, and especially the determined work on the part of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, Staffan de Mistura.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Cuba.

Mrs. Rodríguez Abascal (Cuba) (*spoke in Spanish*): We support the statement made by the representative of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela on behalf of the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries.

Palestine continues to suffer from illegal occupation and the Israeli settlement activities, which violate international law, including human rights and international humanitarian law and the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations. Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian territory are unacceptable, as is the continuation and expansion of the construction of such settlement units, in violation of resolution 2334 (2016). It will not be possible to achieve the two-State solution or a comprehensive, just and lasting settlement to the Palestinian question so long as the relevant resolutions of the United Nations continue to be violated.

We defend the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and to a free, independent and sovereign State, with East Jerusalem as its capital, within the pre-1967 borders and with the return of the Palestinian diaspora to that State. We reiterate Cuba's support for the accession of Palestine to full fledged membership in the United Nations, and call on the Security Council to take a position on this issue.

The Council must adopt without further delay concrete measures to put an end to the occupation by Israel of Palestinian territory and other Arab territories; end the blockade of the Gaza Strip; halt the construction and expansion of settlements and of the separation wall in occupied Palestinian territory; stop the confiscation and destruction of Palestinian lands and properties; and put an end to forced displacement and to the transfer of settlers to occupied Palestinian territory.

Cuba reiterates that all measures or actions that Israel has taken or will take with the aim of modifying the legal, physical or demographic status as well as the institutional structure of Syrian-occupied Golan, as well as measures taken by Israel to exercise jurisdiction and administration over this territory, are null and void from a legal point of view.

We also reaffirm that all these measures and actions, including the illegal construction and expansion of Israeli settlements in the Syrian Golan since 1967, represent violations of international law; international agreements; the Charter and resolutions of the United Nations, including resolution 497 (1981); and the Fourth Geneva Convention, as well as a challenge to the international community.

Cuba demands that Israel withdraw fully from the occupied Syrian Golan back to the borders of 4 June 1967.

The President: I now give the floor to the Permanent Observer of the Observer State of the Holy See to the United Nations.

Archbishop Auza (Holy See): Some heinous acts have of late plunged some areas of the Middle East further into violent chaos and new lows of barbarism. The recent use of chemical agents in Syria once again constitutes a gross violation of international humanitarian law and the Chemical Weapons Convention. The Palm Sunday terrorist bombings in Egypt and the attack on fleeing refugees were abominable attacks against innocent civilians gathered in prayer in sacred places or trying to escape violence and, as such, were attacks against the very foundation of human dignity and rights. My delegation extends its sincere condolences to the families of those whose loved ones have been slaughtered and offers prayerful good wishes to those who survived the attacks and their families.

Lebanon is heroically bearing the burden of hosting millions of refugees from neighbouring countries and territories in conflict. In addition to the impacts of this heavy burden, its stability is also threatened by armed groups. In order to stabilize Lebanon, the Security Council adopted several resolutions calling for the disarming of all armed non-State actors. Yet militias and groups armed and funded by outside sources remain active beyond the control of the Lebanese authorities.

Parallel situations exist in neighbouring territories and countries, where terrorist groups and other armed non-State actors operate, plunging the region deeper into ungovernability, persecuting ethnic and religious minority groups and trampling fundamental human rights.

Since 1947, the Holy See has consistently supported a two-State solution for the State of Israel and a Palestinian State to exist side by side in peace. The peace process between the Israelis and Palestinians can move forward only if it is directly negotiated between the parties, with the strong and effective support of the international community. Leaders and citizens on both sides must have the foresight and courage to make fair concessions, because no agreement can be reached as long as mutually exclusive and impossible demands remain.

Pope Francis calls on both parties to listen to the voices of dialogue, show goodwill and extend gestures of encounter to give their peoples the peace for which their hearts have yearned for so long now.

Twisted religious claims mixed with irredentist ideologies contribute to the bloodshed in the region. Unimaginably barbaric acts are being perpetrated supposedly in the name of God or religion. Ethnic and religious minority groups that for millennia have peacefully coexisted with the Muslim-majority communities have been targeted by extremists. Their cultural and historical patrimony has been destroyed, threatening to annihilate every trace of their long-standing presence in the region. The Holy See urges the international community, through the Security Council, not to forget them and to intensify efforts to spare them from the genocidal scourge of violent terrorist groups.

The Holy See urges religious leaders to speak out forcefully against such terror and to act to control effectively their followers who are reprehensibly claiming to act in God's name by means of terror. No religious leader should tolerate the use of religion as a pretext for actions against human dignity and against the fundamental rights of every man and woman, above all, the right to life and the right of everyone to religious freedom. In this regard, in February this year Al-Azhar and the Holy See held a discussion in Cairo on countering the phenomena of fanaticism, extremism and violence in the name of religion.

Moreover, the Holy See calls upon arms suppliers to act in accord with internationally agreed upon norms for weapons sales. The blood of innocent civilians is a testament to the need to end the unchecked flow of arms into the region.

My delegation wishes to close its remarks with the prayer of Pope Francis after recent attacks in Egypt and Syria:

> "May the Lord convert the hearts of the people who are sowing terror, violence and death"

and

> "may He grant the leaders of nations the courage they need to prevent the spread of conflicts and to put a halt to the arms trade".

Pope Francis's scheduled visit to Egypt on 28 and 29 April will be an opportunity for him to stress once again that there is no greater antidote to violence and hatred than dialogue and encounter.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Nicaragua.

Mr. Hermida Castillo (Nicaragua) (*spoke in Spanish*): We congratulate you, Madam, on your assumption of the presidency of the Security Council

for this month. We welcome the convening of this debate on the Middle East, including the Palestinian question.

Nicaragua endorses the statement made by the representative of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement and that made by Ambassador Neville Gertze of Namibia on behalf of the United Nations Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People.

The Government and the people of the Republic of Nicaragua reaffirm its call for peace, solidarity and mutual respect among peoples and for a peaceful solution to disputes.

Nicaragua expresses its full solidarity with the State of Palestine. We believe that a just and lasting solution to the Palestinian question is key for peace and stability in the Middle East. That peace and stability will come about only through the full implementation of General Assembly and Security Council resolutions on Palestine.

We must make particular mention of the urgent need to implement Security Council resolution 2334 (2016) in order to ensure the viability of the two-State solution, which, after 70 years, would ultimately restore the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people. Nicaragua supports the two-State solution, with the State of Israel and the State of Palestine within the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

We hope that through dialogue, negotiation and continuing efforts to seek a peaceful political solution, and with the good faith of both parties, both peoples can live in lasting peace, given that both States and their peoples have the same right to peace, security and sustainable development.

At this time, as we press ahead with the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, Palestine has the same right as everyone else to live in peace and receive assistance for development, cooperation and investments in order to ensure sustainable development. In our struggle for global peace, which is the unswerving commitment of the people and Government of Nicaragua, the solution to the Palestinian question, in accordance with United Nation resolutions, holds a special place.

In conclusion, we believe that peace in the Middle East entails resolving the Palestinian question, including the withdrawal of Israel from Lebanon, the Syrian Golan and, in short, from all occupied Arab territories. Similarly, it is essential to put an end to foreign interference and intervention in the region and, finally, to achieve peace and security in the Middle East for all peoples of the region.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): For several years now, we have been warning the members of the Security Council about the seriousness of the destructive approach to modifying the content of and references to agenda item pertaining to the Middle East. That approach seeks to sway us from our main objectives and to remove the real content of the agenda item, which is the question of the occupation by Israel of Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese territories and its ongoing violations of the various Security Council resolutions calling for it to withdraw from the occupied Arab territories, in accordance with the 4 June 1967 borders.

Nonetheless, of particular concern and abhorrence is the fact that the representative of the Secretariat is again heading down that very path, pointedly overstepping the bounds of his mandate and deliberately neglecting to speak about the situation in the occupied Syrian Golan. The question of the Syrian Golan is at the very core of the agenda item and a key part of Mr. Mladenov's mandate as Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process. We have pointed out to Mr. Mladenov on several occasions the seriousness of this approach to briefing the Security Council and his failure to address the situation in the occupied Syrian Golan.

My country stresses its intransigent position in support of the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and to establish an independent State that encompasses its entire territory, with Jerusalem as its capital, as well as the right of return of Palestinian refugees, pursuant to General Assembly resolution 194 (III). The continued, dubious silence of the Security Council with regard to Israeli policies and practices has encouraged Israel to pursue its policy of occupation and colonization.

It has also encouraged Israel to violate the Disengagement of Forces Agreement and Security Council resolutions pertaining to the Golan, especially those related to combating terrorism. Moreover, it has encouraged Israel to lend all kinds of support to armed terrorist groups in the disengagement area in the

occupied Syrian Golan, including to terrorists of the Al-Nusra Front, an entity that the Council considers to be a terrorist organization and that receives assistance from Israel in the occupied Syrian Golan. In addition, Israel facilitates travel by Al-Nusra Front terrorists across the demarcation line, treats them at Israeli hospitals and returns them to Syrian territory to resume their terrorist acts. The Qatari regime finances these malicious acts. Israel has not only supported this group, but has also launched several airstrikes, in flagrant violation of Syrian sovereignty and the Disengagement of Forces Agreement, in order to support such terrorist groups. Israel attacked Syria on 17 March in Palmyra in support of the Da'esh terrorist group, which was present there at the time.

Such events illustrate that Israel and terrorism are two sides of the same coin. When we state that Israel and terrorism are essentially two sides of the same coin, we are talking about a long history of Zionist terrorism, which is essentially based on a foundation of extremism and intolerance. Its goal is to kill others, displace them and violate their rights. It is based on a false myth of a religious State that is illusory and has not been accepted under any international laws and norms. It is a State that does not respect freedom, equality or justice.

When the representative of the Israeli occupation asks about root causes of terrorism and bloodshed in the Middle East, we offer facts and evidence to him and others who deliberately take exploit this forum to distort facts and distract us from addressing the real threats facing our region. An entity that occupies territories and makes people refugees cannot claim to be democratic or to adhere to human values. Its representatives cannot speak about chaos and weapons of mass destruction. The entity itself continues to distort history by pilfering territories, building settlements and carrying out massacres against the Arab peoples who live under its occupation. It is the only party that possesses an arsenal of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons and that is protected by permanent members of the Security Council that have even repeatedly rejected any initiative to create a nuclear-free-weapon zone in the Middle East.

The world cannot ignore the fact that the entity was established on the basis of the Balfour Declaration, which has had a serious impact on the history of humankind by allowing, for the first time in history, the establishment of a racist entity that excludes others and is based on an extremist religious ideology, which makes it no different from Da'esh and even worse. This entity enjoys the support of permanent members of the Council that claim to seek peace and the realization of peoples' interest and rights, yet still support the worst occupation humankind has ever witnessed.

We reiterate Syria's sovereignty over the occupied Syrian Golan, in line with the 4 June 1967 borders. That right is not debatable; it is an inalienable right on which there can be no compromise. Our occupied territory and usurped right must be restored and returned to their legitimate owners. Settlers must leave our territory in the Golan, sooner or later. Syrian authorities demand that pressure be exercised on Israel, the occupying Power, to immediately release the Syrian Sudqi Almaqt, who is referred to as Syria's Mandela, and Amal Abu Saleh. Both have been imprisoned in Israel simply for taking photographs that prove that the Israel, the occupying Power, cooperates with the Al-Nusra Front in the occupied Syrian Golan. Such photographs were taken at the gates of the the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force, whose forces are deployed throughout the Golan. That is why those two Syrians were arrested by Israel.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Indonesia.

Mr. Djani (Indonesia): Let me begin by expressing to you, Madam President, the appreciation of the delegation of Indonesia for convening today's quarterly open debate of the Security Council on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question.

We also thank Mr. Nickolay Mladenov, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General, for his comprehensive briefing on the latest developments.

We align ourselves with the statements delivered on behalf of the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People.

In the past few weeks, there have been significant developments in the region. They include the decision by Israel to proceed with its settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory, in direct violation of international law and relevant United Nations resolutions, including resolution 2334 (2016). In that resolution, adopted last December, the Council declared Israel's establishment of settlements in the

Palestinian territory, occupied since 1967, to be illegal, a flagrant violation of international law, and a major obstacle to the achievement of the two-State solution and a just, lasting and comprehensive peace. To that end, the Council demanded that Israel immediately and completely cease all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, and that it fully respect all of its legal obligations. The Council further stated in that resolution that the cessation of Israeli settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory is essential to salvage the two-State solution. The Council therefore called for affirmative steps to be taken immediately to reverse negative trends, such as the settlements, which are imperilling the two-State solution.

In a rather cynical response on 31 March, just three weeks ago, the Government of Israel announced the construction of the first new settlement in two decades. As if in mockery of the Council, the location chosen by the Government of Israel for this new settlement is Emek Shilo, well inside the West Bank. The policy decision itself, and the site chosen for it, appropriately capture the dismissiveness that has been demonstrated by Israel with respect to international law and Security Council resolutions for several decades.

In our statement at the open debate last January (see S/PV.7863), my delegation joined those who, while praising resolution 2334 (2016), affirmed that the real challenge was in its implementation. We warned — a warning we now reiterate once more — that the failure to implement the resolution would ultimately frustrate the hopes of all Palestinians, as well as of the Israeli majority who simply want to live side by side in peace with their neighbours. The implementation of resolution 2334 (2016) is the litmus test of the Council's commitment to peace in the Middle East, for it is the test of its commitment to the two-State solution.

One of the landmarks that we observe in 2017 is the fiftieth year of Israel's occupation of Palestine. We call on Council members to recognize the urgency of the question of Palestine, which can no longer be ignored. History beckons the Council to rise on the right side of history, by standing up with courage and a sense of mission to end this occupation and the grave injustice that it embodies.

Allow me to briefly highlight three related issues within the context of peace and security in the Middle East, namely the situations in Syria, Lebanon and Yemen.

Indonesia is following the situation in Syria with concern and is of the view that peace and security in Syria can only be achieved through dialogue among all relevant parties in the country, leading to a political, rather than a military, solution. We therefore strongly encourage current talks in Geneva and Astana to yield concrete outcomes and agreements. As a party to the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on Their Destruction, Indonesia condemns the use of chemical weapons on 4 April and considers that an independent investigation must be carried out in an objective, impartial and professional manner. It is important to underscore that any multilateral action and solution concerning Syria must be consistent with the Charter of the United Nations.

On Lebanon, my delegation is encouraged by the stable situation in the country and commends the Government of Lebanon for its exceptional cooperation with the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), which we believe contributes significantly to the maintenance of peace and security, in accordance with resolutions 1701 (2006), 425 (1978) and 426 (1978). We understand that a strategic review of UNIFIL is currently being undertaken by the Department of Peacekeeping Operations. In that regard, Indonesia requests that the Council take into consideration the vital role of UNIFIL in the maintenance of peace and security in a country situated in a region where hostilities and conflicts persist.

On Yemen, the special attention of the Council is needed due to the grave humanitarian situation. Approximately 18.8 million Yemenis are in need of humanitarian assistance, while 2.2 million Yemeni children are acutely malnourished. Indonesia supports the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, Mr. Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, in his efforts to encourage the parties to commit to the rapid resumption of a long-lasting cessation of hostilities.

In conclusion, Indonesia urges the Council to seek peace, and to seek it now; to seek justice, and to seek it now through impartial responses to the various issues taking place in the Middle East.

Mr. Al Harthy (Oman) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, I would like to congratulate the United States on

presiding over the Council for this month and thank its delegation for holding this meeting.

Oman aligns itself with the statement delivered by the representative of Jordan on behalf of the Group of Arab States.

Oman believes that the Palestinian question is essential to stability in the Middle East. Without a just and satisfactory solution to such a question, it will be very difficult to establish normal relations among the States and peoples of the region. Unfortunately, we now feel that the Palestinian question and other issues in the Middle East are falling lower on the agenda of the international community because attention is being given to other, potentially more urgent issues. However, we should not forget the plight of people who have been living under occupation for more than 70 years and still hope to attain their right to self-determination by establishing an independent country within the borders of 1967, with Jerusalem as its capital, in accordance with international decisions and resolutions.

Israel is taking advantage of the extraordinary situation in the region to establish and expand settlements. That will complicate international efforts to find a solution to the Palestinian question and will kill hopes for peace and the two-State solution. We call for serious negotiations to reach a comprehensive and lasting settlement that will uphold the rights of all parties to live in peace, side-by-side. We call on the international community to support all efforts that will help to achieve that noble goal, aspired to by all peace-loving countries.

In Oman, peace and dialogue have been key principles since the opening of Oman, which began on 23 July 1970. We believe that dialogue is the principal means by which to deal with all disputes. Nations can achieve rapprochement through joint visions. We are fully convinced that dialogue is the best way to resolve differences peacefully, as opposed to through confrontation and conflict. Based on that principle, and with respect to current issues in the region, such as those in Yemen, Syria and Libya, Oman has been working to achieve convergence and to encourage all adversaries to renounce their differences and come to the negotiating table. Oman has hosted many meetings in that respect.

In relation to Yemen in particular, we have no doubt that developments there have exacerbated already deteriorating economic and security conditions for the Yemeni people. We highly commend the efforts of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Yemen for his work to restore peace and stability in that brotherly country. We call on all Yemeni political parties to support such efforts by engaging in a meaningful dialogue to reach a political solution that would bring the crisis to an end.

I would like to stress that Oman is ready to assume its role in attaining that goal by cooperating with all parties concerned. I also stress that my country will continue to provide humanitarian assistance to Yemeni refugees and internally displaced persons. We call on all regional and international entities and organizations to support these efforts.

In conclusion, we would like to stress that the Middle East suffers from a great many crises and new conflicts. It cannot withstand any escalation. We believe that dialogue on political and peaceful solutions is the best way to find lasting and permanent resolutions to all of those issues.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Kuwait.

Mr. Alotaibi (Kuwait) (*spoke in Arabic*): Since this is the first time my delegation is speaking before the Security Council this month, I would like to start by commending you, Madam President, for your efforts while presiding over the Council in April. We wish you every success. I would also like to commend the United Kingdom for presiding over the Council last month.

Kuwait supports the statements delivered by the representative of Jordan on behalf of the Group of Arab States to the United Nations in New York and the representative of Venezuela on behalf of the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries, and that to be delivered by the representative of Uzbekistan on behalf of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

Today, we have heard of the latest developments on one of the key issues on the agenda of the United Nations — the Palestinian question. Many United Nations resolutions have been adopted and international initiatives launched but not implemented because of hardline positions on Israel and its flagrant and blunt refusal to implement resolutions of international legitimacy. For its part, the international community is unfortunately unable to compel the occupying Power to implement them. What is more worrying is the

occupying Power's contempt for the Council and its resolutions, which should be binding on all.

The illegal and illegitimate policies of Israel in the occupied Palestinian territories, in particular in East Jerusalem, continue unabated. The best proof of that are Israel's inhumane practices, which constitute serious and grave violations of human rights and grave international humanitarian law. Those practices include the confiscation and destruction of properties and homes, as well as illegal settlement activities at unprecedented levels — with new settlements being built and existing ones expanded, leading to the forced displacement of the Palestinian owners of the land. It is well confirmed that expressions of regret over those settlement policies and pronouncements warning of the consequences of those practices on the peace process have not deterred Israel from pursuing them. Instead, Israel has undermined the United Nations by failing to implement resolution 2334 (2016).

The continuation of such aggression and attacks, as well as of the inhumane blockade of Gaza, is the unavoidable outcome of the Council's failure to call on Israel to stop its repeated aggression and to abide by its international obligations as an occupying Power under the 1949 Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War.

A just, lasting and comprehensive peace will not be achieved by calling for the resumption of futile direct negotiations without a timetable, or by remaining silent over Israeli practices and policies. The desired peace should be based on resolutions of international legitimacy, the principle of land for peace, the road map to a permanent two-State solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Arab Peace Initiative. That will enable the Palestinian people to attain their fundamental rights, including their rights to self-determination and to establish an independent State with Jerusalem as its capital.

Kuwait supports the outcome document of the Paris peace conference on the Middle East, held on 15 January, which renewed the commitment of the international community to the two-State solution as the only way to achieve lasting peace. In that connection, we call on the Council to shoulder its responsibilities under the Charter of the United Nations to maintain international peace and security and to take the necessary measures to achieve a lasting solution and peace.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Saudi Arabia.

Mr. Al-Mouallimi (Saudi Arabia) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, I would like to congratulate Ambassador Nikki Haley on her appointment as the United States Ambassador to the United Nations. I have no doubt that our two States will be able to strengthen our bilateral relationship based on our common interests. I would also like to congratulate the United States on acceding to the presidency of the Security Council this month. We have seen a critical and fresh outlook on many of the issues under consideration, which is commendable.

I thank the United States for organizing this open debate on the situation in the Middle East, and in particular on the Palestinian question — an issue that is at the very heart of the conflicts in the Middle East and a very deep and historical injustice endured by the Palestinian people. That injustice has become a wall of tears used and exploited by terrorists to play the Palestinian card and to further their own ends. It is also used by certain corrupt regimes, such as the Iranian regime and the Al-Assad regime, as well as by Hizbullah, which supports them.

Saudi Arabia reiterates its position of full support for the Palestinian people in their effort to regain their sovereign rights, including the right to an independent State throughout the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, including East Jerusalem, in line with the principles of the Charter of the United Nations and international law. We call on Israel to withdraw from all occupied Arab territories, including the Syrian Golan, Lebanese territories and any other occupied Arab land.

My country has not been content merely to proclaim its support for its Palestinian brethren; it has also supported the Arab Peace Initiative, adopted at the 2002 Summit of the League of Arab States in Beirut, which constitutes the primary Arab contribution to the peace process. The Initiative marked a new chapter towards the achievement of a just and lasting peace, if only Israel and all the other States of the region that seek peace and prosperity would support it. I also note the Amman declaration, adopted at the Arab League Summit in March. The declaration strengthens the Arab Peace Initiative and could enable serious negotiations. However, the Israeli side must also accept that offer of peace.

One dangerous aspect of the conflict in Palestine are Israeli plans and measures to judaize the city of

Jerusalem and to change its demography and Arab-Islamic identity, as well as the status of Christian and Islamic holy sites in Israel. Saudi Arabia rejects all such changes. Jerusalem was the first city — the first Qibla — to which Muslims once turned when praying. We cannot accept that the legal status of Jerusalem could be changed. Jerusalem cannot be recognized as the capital of Israel, and countries should not transfer their embassies to Jerusalem. International law should be respected, and all attempts at political manipulation must cease.

The international community met in Paris for the Middle East peace conference, where it demonstrated its commitment to the two-State solution, which is the only solution that will make it possible for us to achieve peace. My delegation has clearly stated that the path to peace is very clear. We need to follow the mechanisms that already exist to put an end to occupation and create a Palestinian State, with East Jerusalem as its capital, within the pre-1967 borders.

We have seen extremely worrying developments in the Syrian tragedy over the past few weeks. We have seen the Syrian authorities continue to use chemical weapons against their own people, and the Iranian Republican Guard and the various militias, including Hizbullah, continue to undermine the lives and dignity of the Syrian people. Syrians are killed, displaced and besieged in an unacceptable way, even as the international community has made repeated calls for an end to these hostilities.

The Security Council has yet to bring those responsible for these acts to justice. We cannot accept impunity, even if it should happen to prevail today. However, we are convinced that justice will triumph in the end. We must support the Syrian people in their aspirations to freedom and dignity. We will eventually achieve peace and dignity, however long it takes.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia supports the military operations of the United States against military targets in Syria in response to the chemical weapons attack in Khan Shaykhun. The Kingdom insists on the need to put an end to the barbaric actions, including murder and ethnic cleansing, targeting certain Syrians. These unacceptable actions perpetrated by the Syrian authorities give terrorists such as Da'esh and Al-Nusra Front an excellent opportunity to fill the void that is left by the authorities in this situation. We insist on the need to strengthen international efforts to weaken the grip of these terrorist organization on parts of the Syrian territory.

My delegation supports the efforts of the Special Envoy, Mr. Staffan de Mistura, and his mandate, established pursuant to resolution 2254 (2015). We need to make progress and implement the first Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex) and move towards the creation of a transitional authority in Syria that is able to welcome all of its people without distinction and reject terrorism, violence and intolerance.

We had hoped that the nuclear agreement with Iran would make it possible to end the nuclear programme in that country and push Iran to abandon its nuclear ambitions. We had hoped that Iran would finally choose a policy of good-neighbourliness, based on strict respect for international law, and cease to interfere in the affairs of neighbouring States. However, what we are seeing on a daily basis is endless proof that Iran has no respect for these principles or for diplomatic customs, in particular. You probably saw, Madam President, that the diplomatic missions of Saudi Arabia in Iran were attacked. Such actions are unacceptable.

Furthermore, Iran continues to back militias in Iraq and Yemen, which is an absolutely unacceptable form of interference. What we are seeing is the reproduction of the Hizbullah model in other countries. Iran is also interfering in the Kingdom of Bahrain. All of this is unacceptable. Iran should content itself to respecting international law rather than undermining security and stability in various parts of the world.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Bangladesh.

Mr. Bin Momen (Bangladesh): Bangladesh thanks the United States presidency for organizing today's quarterly debate. We take note of the useful briefing by Mr. Nickolay Mladenov, Personal Representative of the Secretary-General and Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process.

We align ourselves with the statement made by the representative of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement and the statement to be made by the representative of Uzbekistan on behalf of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

Bangladesh remains concerned over the fratricidal conflicts raging in many parts of the Middle East region with grave implications for the maintenance of international peace and security. The growing

involvement of non-State actors, including terrorist groups, has compounded the situation in most cases, having a dire impact on civilians. We appreciate the Security Council's sustained engagement on these conflict situations, including on the political and humanitarian tracks.

In line with precedents, we wish to maintain our focus on the Palestinian question, which we believe remains a central preoccupation for the international community. As we witness wilful provocations to further diminish the prospects of a two-State solution, the urgency of restoring the political horizon with a view to resuming the Middle East Peace Process cannot be overemphasized. There is every reason for the States Members of the United Nations to collectively question and re-examine the untenable status quo on the Palestinian question. The international peace conference held in Paris on 15 January bore witness to that sense of urgency shared by the international community. The message has been clear — the quest for a just, comprehensive and lasting solution to the Palestinian question must be earnestly pursued, particularly against the backdrop of a volatile regional security situation.

There is near unanimous agreement in the international community that the continued expansion of illegal settlements, including the recent legislation and announcements, constitutes one of the most blatant manifestations of injustice perpetrated against the Palestinian people, and poses a serious impediment to the resumption and pursuit of the peace process. The Security Council's adoption of resolution 2334 (2016) reaffirmed the illegality of the settlements and prevailed upon Israel to halt further expansion of settlements and cease attempts to legitimize the existing ones. We urge the Council to remain seized of the matter and pursue efforts to ensure cessation of all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territories, including in and around East Jerusalem.

Bangladesh remains concerned at the ongoing blockade of the Gaza Strip, which has seriously undermined its recovery and reconstruction efforts. We underscore the critical importance of addressing systematic human rights violations against the Palestinian people by the occupying Power and the need for compliance with the relevant provisions of international humanitarian law. We note with concern the ramifications of the hunger strike by Palestinian prisoners and call for addressing their grievances, including the illegal detention of children.

When Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas visited Bangladesh in January, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina told him that the Government and the people of Bangladesh remain steadfast in advocating for the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, including the right of return, self-determination and an independent and viable State of Palestine, with East Jerusalem as its capital. We continue to support all constructive efforts of the Security Council and the rest of the international community aimed at finding lasting political solutions to the different conflict situations in the Middle East and at working towards addressing the various root causes and drivers of conflicts with a view to sustaining peace in the region.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Uzbekistan.

Mr. Shadiev (Uzbekistan): I have the honour to deliver this statement on behalf of the States members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in my capacity as Chair of the OIC Group.

This meeting takes place in a climate overburdened by the increasingly unstable and volatile situation in the Middle East, with the unresolved and festering question of Palestine remaining at the heart of unrest in the region. The OIC is very concerned about the contempt by Israel, the occupying Power, for the Security Council's authoritative decisions and demands, in contravention of international law and in total obstruction of a political horizon for a peaceful solution.

The escalation of illegal Israeli settlement activities in the last few months through the establishment of a new colonialist settlement, along with the adoption of the Israeli regularization law, an illegal scheme aimed at entrenching so-called settlement outposts, are of grave concern and must be condemned. The OIC reaffirms that the continuation of Israeli settlement policy would undermine the territorial integrity, viability and contiguity of a future Palestinian State, let alone the fact that settlement activities are illegal acts constituting flagrant violations of international law and United Nations resolutions, in particular resolution 2334 (2016), which unequivocally demanded an end to all such activities. The OIC therefore calls upon the Security Council to ensure the full compliance of Israel, the occupying Power, with its legal obligations under international law.

The Council must act to uphold its responsibilities to halt Israeli settlement acts, which have been manifestly and deliberately escalated in the occupied Palestinian territory, especially in and around East Jerusalem. We further appeal for the international community's sustained engagement, as also called for by resolution 2334 (2016), and its full support at this critical period for sponsorship for a timed multilateral political process that would lead to the enforcement of United Nations resolutions aimed at finally ending the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian land, in effect since 1967, and achieving the internationally endorsed two-State solution, to which the OIC remains unflinchingly committed.

The OIC also continues to view with profound concern Israel's frequent provocative violations and assaults against holy places, especially Al-Aqsa mosque, and its policies to change the Arab character, status, landmarks and demographic composition of occupied East Jerusalem, including through the building of settlements in the city, excavating beneath the Al-Aqsa mosque, desecrating Islamic and Christian sites, including by extremist Israeli settlers and religious fanatics, and demolishing homes and evicting Palestinian residents, with a view to isolating occupied East Jerusalem from its Palestinian environs.

All such actions continue to raise tensions and sensitivities and are alarmingly aggravating the fragile situation on the ground, with the potential to spark grave consequences. The Security Council must demand that all such illegal acts cease and that Israel, the occupying Power, abide by its obligations under international law and United Nations resolutions regarding Jerusalem. In this regard, the OIC reiterates its firm commitment to the rights of the Palestinian people in occupied East Jerusalem, which forms an integral part of the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967.

The OIC remains firm in its conviction that the Security Council must not be absolved of its role in this regard and should act to ensure the realization by the Palestinian people of their right to self-determination, sovereignty and independence in their state of Palestine in the territory occupied since 1967, with East Jerusalem as its capital, as well as a just solution for the plight of the Palestine refugees in line with United Nations resolutions and international law.

I must also, at this meeting, reiterate the concerns of the OIC regarding the grave humanitarian suffering being endured by the Palestinian people throughout occupied Palestine, including in the Gaza Strip, where the Palestinian civilian population continues to suffer from the inhumane, illegal Israeli blockade, now in its tenth year. We reiterate the call for an end to this massive form of collective punishment of the Palestinian people and for urgent efforts to reconstruct, rehabilitate and revive Gaza, which also remains an integral part of the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967.

Today, we must also reiterate the call for attention to the plight of Palestinian political prisoners in Israeli detention centres. We call for respect of their rights, in accordance with the Fourth Geneva Convention and international human rights law, and for an end to their abuse and captivity by the occupying Power. The hunger strike recently undertaken by thousands of prisoners is a cry for attention to their critical plight and for action to resolve it, and we appeal for international compassion and responsibility in this regard.

The OIC stands ready to address and to cooperate for the resolution of the many other critical issues in the Middle East, including the grave situations in the region, at the appropriate meetings in the Security Council dedicated to the review of those specific situations, with the aim of ending the human suffering and crises in those countries and of contributing to the establishment of peace and stability in the Middle East region.

The OIC firmly believes in addressing the root causes of conflicts, including foreign occupation, the lack of opportunities, politically motivated agendas and political alienation and aggression, in order to create space for improving international peace and security. There is no doubt that the conflicts in the Middle East, including the tragedy of the Palestinian question and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with the occupation now in its fiftieth year and what seems to be chronic divisions within the Security Council, have allowed menaces, such as violent extremism and terrorism, to flourish in the region and reach the proportions we must contemplate today, as we collectively grapple with the elusive search for viable solutions. Therefore, the multifaceted dimension and root causes of the region's conflicts must be addressed without exception and in the context of international law, including humanitarian and human rights law, and with adherence to the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, the guarantors for peace and security in the Middle East and globally.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Viet Nam.

Mrs. Nguyen (Viet Nam): At the outset, I would like to express my appreciation to the United States presidency for convening this open debate. My thanks also go to United Nations Special Coordinator Nickolay Mladenov for his informative briefing.

Viet Nam aligns itself with the statement delivered by the representative of Venezuela on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement.

Together with people all over the world, Viet Nam is deeply concerned about the current critical situation in the Middle East. The outbreak of terror caused by terrorism and extremism, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the protracted conflict in Syria and Yemen, tension and violence in Iraq and other places in the region have led to the vast loss of lives, the widespread violation of human rights, unprecedented displacement, a refugee crisis and mass destruction, even of cultural heritage, causing misery and suffering to millions of people and posing a grave threat to regional and international peace and security.

Despite the tireless efforts of the international community, international cooperation and response to the complex issues in the region are still not up to the level of the danger posed. It is regrettable that the Security Council, the United Nations powerful body with primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security, still lacks unity and political will in seeking a peaceful and comprehensive solution to the conflicts that rage across the region.

The Palestinian question remains at the heart of the instability in the Middle East. The continuing cycle of violence, military and settlement activities, and land confiscation have cast a shadow over the ever fragile Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Thousands of families have been displaced and homeless. The Palestinian people continue to endure pains and hardships. We call for the cessation of Israeli settlement activities. We urge all parties concerned to immediately stop actions that may further escalate tensions, refrain from any action of hostility, incitement or violence and strictly abide by international law, especially international humanitarian and human rights laws.

Viet Nam has always supported the legitimate struggle of the Palestinian people for their fundamental rights, especially the sacred right of self-determination and the establishment of an independent State. We advocate a peaceful settlement of the decades-long Israeli-Palestinian conflict through constructive dialogue and diplomatic negotiations, in accordance with relevant United Nations resolutions, including resolution 2334 (2016) and the Arab Peace Initiative, aimed at achieving a just, comprehensive and lasting solution and ensuring the legitimate interests of all parties concerned. We call for an early resumption of negotiations and welcome all intensified efforts by the United Nations, the Quartet, the League of Arab States and regional countries to achieve a two-State solution on the 1967 lines with a vision of two States — Israel and Palestine — living side by side in peace, security and mutual recognition.

Viet Nam has been following recent developments in Syria with great concern. We strongly condemn the use of chemical weapons and are opposed to any action against innocent civilians. We urge all the parties concerned to refrain from any actions that could escalate tensions, swiftly implement resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué of 30 June 2012 (S/2012/522, annex) and work together to seek a political solution to the Syrian conflict through negotiation. We believe that only a peaceful settlement based on the fundamental principles of international law, particularly as outlined in the Charter of the United Nations and the Chemical Weapons Convention, including no use or threat of use of force and respect for Syria's independence, national sovereignty and territorial integrity, can bring sustainable peace and stability to Syria and end the suffering of the Syrian people.

Having endured tremendous hardships and losses as a result of wars in their own country, the Vietnamese people sympathize deeply with the people of the Middle East. I would like to conclude by stressing that it is high time for the Security Council to spare no effort to shoulder its responsibilities and respond collectively to the serious security challenges confronting the region and the whole world. We are only as strong as we are united and as weak as we are divided.

The President: I now give the floor to the Head of the Delegation of the European Union to the United Nations.

Mr. Vale de Almeida (European Union): I would like to begin by acknowledging the presence of Special Coordinator Mladenov and thanking him for his good work and his excellent briefing this morning.

I have the honour to speak on behalf of the European Union (EU) and its 28 member States. The candidate countries Montenegro and Albania align themselves with this statement.

The Middle East peace process continues to be a top priority for the European Union, and our policies on the issue remain clear and consistent. We believe that it is more important than ever to uphold international consensus on the key principles underpinning the Middle East peace process, which are the indispensable cornerstones for a just and enduring peace for Israelis and Palestinians, based on a two-State solution, with the State of Israel and an independent, democratic, contiguous, sovereign and viable State of Palestine living side by side in peace, security and mutual recognition.

There is no viable alternative to a negotiated two-State solution, based on the parameters set out in the European Council Conclusions of July 2014, that fulfils the legitimate aspirations of both parties — including Israeli and Palestinian security needs and Palestinian aspirations for statehood and sovereignty — ends the occupation that began in 1967 and resolves all permanent status issues. On 23 December 2016, the Security Council adopted resolution 2334 (2016), which reiterates some of the key threats to the viability of a two-State solution that were also identified in the July report of the Quartet, including continued settlement activities and acts of violence, terror and incitement.

The European Union would like to recall that settlements are illegal under international law, constitute an obstacle to peace and threaten to make a two-State solution impossible. The European Union will not recognize any changes to the pre-1967 borders, including with regard to Jerusalem, other than those agreed on by the parties. The EU will continue to distinguish, in its relevant dealings, between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories occupied since 1967. As for Jerusalem, the EU will continue to respect the international consensus embodied in resolution 478 (1980). A way must be found through negotiations to resolve the status of Jerusalem as the future capital of both States.

Unfortunately, actions on the ground continue to imperil the prospects for a two-State solution. Since January, the Israeli authorities have advanced plans and tenders for nearly 6,000 settlement units in the occupied Palestinian territory. In late March, the Israeli Government decided, for the first time in more than two decades, to establish a new settlement deep inside the West Bank. It also declared further land deep inside the West Bank to be State land. The EU is deeply concerned about the enactment in February of the so-called regularization law, which would mean crossing a new threshold, even under Israeli law, for the settlement enterprise in the West Bank. We urge Israel to end all settlement activity and dismantle the outposts erected since March 2001, in line with prior obligations.

The EU is also deeply concerned about the significant increase in Israeli demolitions and confiscations of Palestinian structures, including EU-funded projects, in Area C, which is critical to the viability and contiguity of a future Palestinian State. Many affected communities, such as Khan Al-Ahmar, are at imminent risk of eviction and forced transfer. The EU remains committed to protecting the rights of Palestinians, including their human rights, and to providing assistance to people in vulnerable situations in their current place of residence in Area C. We urge Israel to meet its obligations under international law, including human rights and humanitarian law, allow the unimpeded delivery of humanitarian aid and accelerate the approval of master plans and building permits for Palestinians in Area C.

The EU firmly rejects terror and any acts of violence that take innocent lives, as well as any incitement to hatred and violence, which we see as fundamentally incompatible with advancing a peaceful settlement. It will be critical to uphold commitments to acting effectively against violence and incitement if mutual trust is to be rebuilt and another escalation avoided. Alleged violations and abuses of human rights by all sides must be investigated in accordance with international standards. The European Union would like to emphasize that the compliance of States and non-State actors with international humanitarian and human rights law, including their accountability, is fundamental to peace and security in the region.

We call on Palestinian leaders to consistently and clearly condemn terrorist attacks and take all steps within their capacity to end incitement to hatred and violence. We also urge Palestinian factions to engage in good faith in the reconciliation process, which is an important element in reaching an eventual two-State solution. The European Union urges all parties in the West Bank and Gaza to advance that process with a view to holding democratic elections in the West Bank and Gaza. A single, legitimate and democratic Palestinian

authority, with full control over Gaza, is critical to achieving a viable Palestinian State. To that end, the EU calls on all Palestinian factions to find common ground and work together to address the needs of the Palestinian people.

Last but not least, the situation in Gaza is unsustainable. All parties must act swiftly to produce a fundamental change in the political, security and economic situation in the Gaza Strip in accordance with resolution 1860 (2009), including ending the closure of the crossing points and opening them fully, while addressing Israel's legitimate security concerns. The EU stands ready to support the consolidation of Palestinian State capacities and efforts to strengthen the Palestinian economy, both in the West Bank and Gaza.

To make progress, we need the parties to demonstrate, through policies and actions, their genuine commitment to the two-State solution in order to prevent the irreversible loss of this solution and to find a new path to successful final status negotiations. The EU will support all serious peacemaking efforts and will continue to work closely with the parties and with partners in the region and beyond, including within the framework of the Quartet.

As reflected in discussions at the Summit of the League of Arab States in March, the Arab Peace Initiative provides key elements for the settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, as well as the opportunity for building a regional security framework. The EU strongly believes that further dialogue on that basis will bring results. A comprehensive resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could provide a new impetus for peace and security throughout the wider region, and therefore that opportunity must be seized.

I would like to say a few words about Syria. Syria has been the geostrategic link between Europe and the Middle East. It was the core of the Mediterranean civilization that shaped our culture, our traditions and our way of thinking. That role as a bridge between civilizations and continents is what has made that country so important throughout its entire history. Today Syria is at war — a war that is killing its people and destroying its cultural heritage. We condemn the systematic, widespread and gross violations and abuses of human rights and all violations of international humanitarian law by all parties, particularly the Syrian Government and its allies. The EU continues to call for full unhindered humanitarian access and for accountability for all violations of human rights and international humanitarian law.

The historic bridge is collapsing, and we cannot simply wait for the conflict to end while we spend billions to contain the crisis and keep the refugees fed and sheltered. The United Nations — the Security Council — can build bridges, and Europe is here to help. That is why the European Union endorsed the strategy for Syria in early April, aimed at promoting a political solution in line with resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué of 30 June 2012 (S/2012/522, annex). We are focused on putting all our weight behind achieving a framework agreement in the United Nations-mediated intra-Syrian talks in Geneva that will contain a political package so that a negotiated transitional political process can be implemented, in line with the previously mentioned resolution.

Earlier this month, we hosted in Brussels a conference on the theme "Supporting the future of Syria and the region", together with six co-chairs — Germany, Kuwait, Norway, Qatar, the United Kingdom and the United Nations. It was a very successful conference, on which I briefed the General Assembly yesterday.

The EU condemns in the strongest terms the chemical attack on the town of Khan Shaykhun in Idlib province on 4 April, which had horrific consequences, causing the deaths and injuries of scores of civilians, including children and relief workers, with many victims displaying symptoms of gas poisoning. The use of chemical weapons or chemical substances as weapons amounts to a war crime. Their use, including by the regime and Da'esh, must stop, and identified perpetrators must be held accountable for that violation of international law.

We strongly support the investigation by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Fact-Finding Mission in Syria, which is in the process of gathering and analysing information from all available sources, as a precursor to further investigations by the United Nations-OPCW Joint Investigative Mechanism. The European Union is united behind their work and committed to bringing impunity to an end.

We strongly condemn the horrific attack in Rashidin on 15 April, which killed at least 126 persons, many of them children, and injured dozens.

Accountability for gross and systematic violations perpetrated in Syria is paramount. Any inability to ensure accountability of the perpetrators can result in additional brutality and in the continued flouting of international norms. The EU calls on all parties to the conflict to uphold their obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law.

In concluding, I would also like to speak briefly about Lebanon. The European Union welcomes Lebanon's recent progress to end the political stalemate, with the election of a president and a new Government in place. The next important milestone for Lebanon's democratic process is an agreement on a new electoral framework before the expiration of parliament's mandate on 20 June and the holding of timely elections. The EU reaffirms its commitment to the unity, sovereignty, stability, independence and territorial integrity of Lebanon. It reiterates the importance of an ongoing commitment to a policy of dissociation from all regional conflicts, in line with the Baabda Declaration.

The European Union stresses the importance of Lebanon's continued commitment to the full implementation of its international obligations, including Security Council resolutions 1559 (2004), 1680 (2006), 1701 (2006) and 1757 (2007). The EU also commends Lebanon's extraordinary efforts in continuing to host more than 1.1 million refugees from Syria until conditions for their return are met, and stresses the importance of living up to commitments with regard to rights and protection of refugees. As confirmed at the Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region, the EU is determined to continue its support to Lebanon's stabilization and development and calls upon the regional partners and the international community to do the same.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Costa Rica.

Mr. Castro Córdoba (Costa Rica) (*spoke in Spanish*): We congratulate you, Madam President, and the Mission of the United States of America on your assumption of the presidency of the Security Council for the month of April. We also welcome the statement made by Mr. Nickolay Mladenov, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process.

Millions of human beings live every day in anguish and despair and with the painful memories of armed conflicts. Costa Rica deeply regrets the spread of conflicts in the Middle East. The situation in recent years has deteriorated, and it has not been possible to achieve peace and security in the region. It is urgent that we succeed in putting an end to the humanitarian crisis confronting us and seek a prompt political solution. The crisis has become a humanitarian tragedy of scandalous proportions, an affront to all of humankind. We therefore once again urge the Security Council to fully exercise its mandate to maintain international peace and security, as clearly set forth in the Charter of the United Nations.

My country regrets the recurrent terrorist attacks that have taken place in the Middle East. We categorically condemn all acts, methods and practices of terrorism and violent extremism in all their manifestations, wherever they take place and whoever the perpetrators are, regardless of their motivation. That includes condemnation of financial, material or political support for terrorism as unjustifiable under applicable international law, given its detrimental effects on the enjoyment of human rights and on democratic societies. Such acts are a threat to the territorial integrity and the security of States. Those activities must be addressed and tackled through multilateralism, in accordance with the provisions of international law and in full respect for human rights. In the same spirit, Costa Rica condemns unilateral actions carried out in contravention of the Charter of the United Nations.

We reaffirm the primary responsibility of States to prevent and combat violent extremism, but we appeal for a human rights approach in combating it. That approach should encompass the whole of society, including the participation of Governments, civil society, local and religious leaders and the private sector.

With regard to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Costa Rica reiterates the urgent need to resume negotiations between the parties on the core issues of the conflict that still exist, based on the obligations already made and on previously signed agreements. We must find a political solution to that conflict and create as soon as possible a new peace architecture for resolving the differences, one that will lead to the achievement of the objectives set by the international community: harmonious coexistence between an independent Palestinian State and the State of Israel.

With regard to the conflict in Syria and the insufficient action taken by the Security Council, Costa Rica urges all States members of the General Assembly to take on their share of responsibility and

assume their roles as set out under Articles 11, 12 and 14 of the Charter of the United Nations. The General Assembly must act decisively on issues pertaining to the maintenance of international peace and security. That is a collective responsibility. We cannot continue to ignore the suffering of the millions of people who have fallen victim to that political and military game.

I therefore urge members that we carry out our work and put multilateralism into practice so that solidarity prevails, along with the commitment to satisfy the interests of the entire international community and not just those of one group of nations. The United Nations must play its role as the epicentre of global governance based on mutual respect and the collective search for solutions.

We believe that we must urgently join forces in investigating and condemning those responsible for the most heinous crimes so as to halt any act that results in the death of innocents, bring about justice and end the suffering and losses of more innocent civilians. The only thing worse than this human tragedy is that impunity succeeds instead of justice.

Costa Rica reiterates its concern about the growing tension generated by the conflicts in the Middle East and vigorously calls on a united international community to achieve peace in that region. We make this call specifically to all permanent members of the Council so that, in accordance with code of conduct of the Accountability, Coherence and Transparency Group, they commit to refraining from the use the veto when we are faced with the commission of the most heinous crimes, so that the Council can act swiftly to ensure the protection of civilians.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Malaysia.

Mr. Yaakob (Malaysia): I thank you, Madam President, for convening today's debate. I also thank Mr. Nickolay Mladenov, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, for his in-depth briefing and assessment.

My delegation associates itself with the statements delivered earlier by the representatives of Venezuela and Uzbekistan on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, respectively.

Last month (see S/PV.7908), we listened to Mr. Mladenov present the first report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of resolution 2334 (2016). We regret the fact that that briefing on the implementation of the landmark resolution was not officially published and circulated in writing as per standard practice. We believe that it is crucial to have this report secured in writing to ensure the effective monitoring and accountability of the parties to the conflict, in line with the goals of resolution 2334 (2016).

As one of the sponsors of resolution 2334 (2016), which was adopted last December with the overwhelming support of Council members and the international community, we reject any attempt to undermine its implementation. We also oppose any attempt to dilute or sideline the question of Palestine in the Council, including in today's open debate. We believe that if the Council is sincere in fulfilling its mandate for maintaining international peace and security, it should not turn a blind eye to the undeniable realities on the ground. In fact, the Council should pay more attention and take effective action on the long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

As Mr. Mladenov, the Special Coordinator, reported, the settlement expansion by Israel continued in the first quarter of 2017. That is in total disregard of international law, the 2004 advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice and various Council resolutions that have clearly defined Israeli settlements as illegal. Furthermore, settlement activities threaten the territorial contiguity of a future Palestinian State and undermine the two-State solution and, consequently, peace in the region.

Only a week after the briefing on the implementation of resolution 2334 (2016), Israel announced its decision to build a new settlement on the occupied Palestinian territory — the first new settlement in two decades. We commend the Secretary-General's swift condemnation of Israel's decision in that regard. The decision also came on the heels of the passing of the so-called regularization law by the Israeli Parliament on 6 February, which effectively legalized illegal outposts built on privately owned Palestinian land in contravention of relevant international law. Once again, those actions put into question Israel's sincerity about working together with Palestine towards a two-State solution. But the Security Council remained silent despite the flagrant breach of its own resolution. Malaysia reiterates it call for the Council to shoulder its responsibility under the Charter of the United Nations and act accordingly to maintain international peace and security by taking effective actions against illegal settlement activities.

In anticipation of a written report on the implementation of resolution 2334 (2016), Malaysia looks forward to a report that is objective, independent and free from intimidation or attempts to obscure facts and evidence on the ground. The report should be based on international law, international standards of human rights and the relevant United Nations resolutions, as well as the values and principles of the Charter.

Lastly, as this year marks a half-century of Israel's illegal occupation of Palestine, Malaysia stresses the urgent need for the Council to address the root cause of the problem and end the occupation rather than continuing to focus on the symptoms of the conflict. The Council needs to go beyond condemning sporadic attacks and acts of violence and should address the bigger question of what generates, fuels and breeds such anger, frustration and despair — all of which threaten international peace and stability — in the first place.

Malaysia reiterates its firm commitment to working together with the international community to push for a just, comprehensive and final settlement to the conflict that would see the establishment of an independent, contiguous and viable Palestinian State based on the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital, living side by side with Israel in peace and security.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Qatar.

Ms. Al-Thani (Qatar) (*spoke in Arabic*): We congratulate you, Madam President, on assuming the presidency of the Security Council and thank you for convening this important open debate. Indeed, we must take advantage of the opportunity that holding this meeting at such a fragile time affords us to move forward on the path to peace and stability in the Middle East and in the world. We would also like to thank the Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General for his briefing this morning.

Today, tensions around the world are increasing, and that is particularly true with regard to the Middle East. That has a serious impact on the region and the world in general. Every day we see the horrifying and painful images that are the result of those crises and their intensification, as well as of non-respect for international law and human rights. International action today does not keep pace with events on the ground, and that has given rise to the spread of terrorism. The Middle East, as well as the world in general, is consequently paying a high price. We therefore believe that this open debate must help the Security Council move forward on the path towards peace in the Middle East and that it is absolutely necessary to save the region's resources and people, who are in dire need of international peace and security.

The State of Qatar understands full well what the international community's responsibility is. We are actively working in accordance with international law and the Charter of the United Nations to strengthen international peace and security and addressing the challenges confronting us. But that is also tied to the commitment of the concerned parties, who must uphold and follow international law, as well as human rights law and international norms in general. The international community has established mechanisms and criteria that we must respect so as to reach a just and lasting solution to the crisis in the Middle East.

There is no doubt that our effort to achieve peace must have an effective impact on a number of crises, in particular on terrorism. We have a great deal to gain if we manage to overcome terrorism. The crisis has continued for several decades, and to overcome it we need to try to stop wanting to impose certain realities and to go against international law. In fact, that type of actions only undermines international efforts aimed at reaching peace in the Middle East. If we want to strictly adhere to international law, then it will be possible for us to make progress.

The State of Qatar would like to express its profound concern about the current impasse in the Middle East peace process. We have made significant efforts in trying to relaunch the negotiations between Israel and Palestine so that those States can coexist side by side — especially the Palestinian State, which should exist within the pre-1967 borders and with East Jerusalem as its capital, in line with the various resolutions of the Security Council and also on the basis of the Arab Peace Initiative. However, to achieve that, the Israeli occupation of various Arab territories must end, particularly in the Syrian Golan. Additionally, settlement-building has to end. The blockade of Gaza must end. Palestinian refugees must be allowed to return.

My country is aware of the complexities and dangers related to the Middle East situation. We believe in peace and the need to make every possible effort to achieve it.

The use of chemical weapons against civilians in Khan Shaykhun in Syria has only deepened the crisis that our Syrian brethren have been experiencing for six years. The impact of the attack has been very serious, and it has proven that the international community is powerless and incapable of changing the situation, even as crimes against humanity are committed on a daily basis. The State of Qatar condemns in the strongest terms those unacceptable acts. Such barbarism needs to be ended, and we support the American military action against military targets in Syria.

We call on the international community to shoulder its responsibility for putting an end to the crimes committed by the Syrian regime. The attack using chemical weapons clearly proves that the situation in Syria is a danger to the international community. So far, we have failed to find a solution to the Syrian crisis, even as the Syrian regime continues to commit crimes and to attack civilian populations and civilian targets. The regime creates obstacles in order to block the delivery of humanitarian and medical assistance to the Syrian people. That has had an impact on demographics and has allowed terrorism to spread in the country.

There is a real problem of impunity in Syria, which encourages criminals to continu committing their crimes. It is a real problem because we have not been able to prevent those criminals from committing those crimes. That is why the international community must understand its responsibility. The State of Qatar has tried, with the help of Liechtenstein, to establish an international independent mechanism that could make it possible to prosecute those responsible for the serious crimes in Syria. It is an important step forward, and Qatar has offered $1 million for that mechanism.

In the tragedy experienced by the Syrian people, and in particular the attack in Khan Shaykhun, we see that they are alone in facing such terrible violence. We want to try to contribute in some way to to resolving the crisis. On that point, we believe that the use of chemical weapons, as exhibited in Khan Shaykhun, is a particularly serious crime. We ask the Security Council to take necessary steps to put an end to those very serious violations. We need to reach a peaceful solution to the Syrian crisis in order to allow the Syrian people to realize their legitimate aspirations, particularly in accordance with the first Geneva communiqué. We need to set up a transitional Government.

In conclusion, Qatar reiterates its principled position to support all international efforts to achieve peace and security in the Middle East and strengthen international peace and security.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Maldives.

Ms. Zahir (Maldives): My delegation wishes to thank the United States of America in its capacity as President of the Security Council, for convening this quarterly open debate in connection with the agenda item on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question.

Following the adoption of resolution 2334 (2016) — a significant and welcome step forward in the Security Council to address the predicament of the Palestinian people — it is with great concern that my delegation joins this timely debate. While resolution 2334 (2016) calls on Israel to take steps to cease all settlement activities in the occupied territory of Palestine, the occupying Power, Israel, continues to blatantly violate international law, including by disregarding resolutions of this very Council, through its continued expansion of illegal settlements, as well as through its demolitions of structures on a large scale in the occupied territory of Palestine. By doing so, Israel is flagrantly hindering the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination, further undermining any credible solution towards peace.

The Maldives strongly condemns the recent decision by the occupying Power, Israel, to create a new settlement in Geulat Tzion. That development is extremely worrying, as it threatens peace and may exacerbate tensions on the ground. The Government of Maldives calls on the occupying Power, Israel, to respect its international obligations, particularly with respect to resolution 2334 (2016).

The Maldives also welcomes the recent report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of resolution 2334 (2016), delivered orally to this Council by the Personal Representative of the Secretary-General, Mr. Nikolay Mladenov (see S/PV.7908), and supports the call for a substantive written report in support of the Council's duties to advance the resolution's objectives. We believe that it is critical to build on the momentum generated by the resolution and take further concrete measures to bring an end to the Israeli occupation and ascertain a peaceful and sustainable resolution of the

conflict, which has continuously overshadowed peace and security in the region.

The Syrian conflict, the deadliest conflict that the twenty-first century has witnessed thus far, has now entered its seventh year. Hundreds of thousands of people have been killed, millions have fled, hospitals and basic infrastructure have been annihilated and cities have been destroyed, along with cultural heritage. Yet the suffering of the Syrian people does not seem to be coming to an end. We call on the international community, as well as the members of the Security Council, to make progress on the implementation of Security Council resolutions on issues relating to the Middle East and to address them in a concrete manner, in order to maintain the credibility of this Council.

The Maldives would like to reiterate its call for a two-State solution that recognizes the sovereign and independent State of Palestine and that is based on the borders of 1967, with East Jerusalem as its capital. Peace in the Middle East can be achieved only through political will, international cooperation, tangible actions and a united Security Council. The Maldives stands ready to support the collective efforts of the international community in securing a more peaceful future for the Middle East and maintaining international peace and order. The right to life in peace is a right for each and every individual in such conflicts as much as it is for each one of us here.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Turkey.

Mr. Sinirlioğlu (Turkey): At the outset, I would like to thank Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Mr. Nikolay Mladenov, for his presentation.

While brutal oppression of people, sectarian and divisive policies, terrorism and humanitarian catastrophes sweep through the Middle East, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains a major source of instability. It continues to undermine the prospects for lasting regional and global peace. Failing to address the dismal reality of 50 years of occupation deepens the sense of injustice, breeds desperation and creates fertile ground for extremist groups to exploit. Turkey is determined to continue undertaking efforts to contribute to a just, comprehensive and lasting peace leading to the establishment of an independent State of Palestine within the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital. That is the only way to ensure peace and security for both sides. In that regard, we have welcomed recent initiatives to revitalize the Middle East peace process.

We all know that those steps will make a difference only if they are fully implemented in good faith. Resolution 2334 (2016) placed on record once again the destructive effect of Israel's illegal settlement activities on lasting peace. The recent, notable increase in settlement activity not only hampers the possibility of a viable Palestine, but also eliminates the hope for a possible future coexistence.

The Paris peace conference in January provided an opportunity for the international community to reaffirm its strong commitment to the two-State solution based on established parameters, including relevant United Nations resolutions and the Arab Peace Initiative. Israelis are expected to listen to those calls, take the hand extended with the Arab Peace Initiative, end the occupation and step into a future of harmony with their neighbours. The preservation of the historic status and sanctity of Al-Haram al-Sharif and the prevention of provocative steps in relation to Jerusalem are of the utmost importance to that end.

Fully aware of the dire humanitarian situation in Palestine, especially in Gaza, Turkey is pursuing its efforts to improve the living conditions of Palestinians through development assistance and reconstruction projects. Currently our technical teams are working in cooperation with the authorities of the State of Palestine on possible ways to remedy the grave scarcity of water and electricity in Gaza. In addition, we are supporting the work of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East in view of its essential role in the lives of the Palestinian refugees. In February and March, Turkey, together with Switzerland, led broad consultations on the financing of the Agency in response to the Secretary-General's request. We hope that Member States and key stakeholders will give due consideration to the recommendations outlined in the Secretary-General's recent report (A/71/849), which was drafted based on those consultations.

Since the very beginning of the crisis in Syria, Turkey has emphasized the need to address the root cause of the problem, which is the fact that the Syrian regime has waged war against the Syrian people. The failure to do so has led to mass atrocities, terrorism and the forced displacement of millions of persons. The use of chemical weapons, which constitutes a crime against humanity and a war crime, has been one

of the most horrendous aspects of the conflict. The brutal attack in Khan Shaykhun is the latest example. Despite the previous reports of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons-United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism, confirming the regime's failure to fulfil its obligations, lack of a timely and decisive response encouraged the regime to continue its relentless attacks with impunity.

We have been closely following the developments in the aftermath of Khan Shaykhun. We offered emergency medical assistance to those affected by the chemical attack, facilitated the work of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) mission in Turkey and engaged with the World Health Organization. In accordance with resolution 2235 (2015), we shared the findings of our national analysis on the victims of the attacks, which point to the use of sarin gas, with the relevant United Nations authorities. We will continue to support the investigation conducted by the OPCW, as well as steps to prevent the repetition of such brutal attacks. In that regard, the operation by the United States targeting the Shayrat air base was a proportionate and timely response to the regime's appalling acts.

Turkey has been undertaking intensive efforts to end the violence in Syria and reach a political solution based on the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex), as outlined in resolution 2254 (2015). While a genuine political transition is the only way to end the Syrian conflict, negotiations to that end will not bear fruit if the fighting continues. That is why we facilitated and became the guarantors of a nation-wide ceasefire agreed with the Russian Federation and Iran. The Astana meetings, which are complementary and supportive of the United Nations-led general political process, aim at strengthening the ceasefire and adopting confidence-building measures.

However, the process remains fragile and requires all the relevant actors to assume their responsibilities and use their influence. It is crucial to maintain the momentum achieved in the latest round of the Geneva talks. The regime representatives should not be allowed to poison the upcoming talks either by violations on the ground or by using threats at the table.

It takes a multidimensional strategy to achieve to the dual objectives of eliminating terrorism and stabilizing Syria. Turkey's resolve to fight Da'esh and other terrorist organizations in Syria remains firm. Operation Euphrates Shield — launched on 24 August 2016, in accordance with Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations — was successfully concluded on 29 March 2017. The operation not only eliminated the strike capabilities of Da'esh in northern Syria, but also contributed to the preservation of Syria's territorial integrity and unity. The Free Syrian Army, supported by the Turkish armed forces and coalition air forces, cleared an area of 2,015 square kilometres, creating in practice a terror-free zone. Nearly 50,000 Syrians returned to areas liberated by the operation. More will return if their safety can be ensured.

Turkey, together with its partners, will continue its efforts to address the plight of the Syrian people and find a solution to the conflict that will meet their legitimate aspirations.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Norway.

Ms. Stener (Norway): Today I will focus on three themes: the situation in Syria, the protection of religious minorities and the Middle east peace process.

In Syria, only a political solution can provide lasting peace. The Council must fulfil its role in promoting a peaceful solution to the conflict. In the upcoming rounds in Geneva, we will underscore the importance of involving civil society and women's representatives. At the Syria conference in Brussels, which we co-hosted, donors committed to sustaining their support to the Syria crisis response. We encourage donors to deliver on their promises. Norway will deliver on our four-year pledge of $1.16 billion.

Secondly, Norway is deeply concerned about the deteriorating situation for religious minorities in the Middle East. The unacceptable atrocities against Christians, Yazidis and other religious minorities in Egypt, Iraq and other parts of the region are creating deep divisions within local communities. We, the international society, must do our part in protecting the minority populations. The concerned countries must also do theirs.

There is a strong international consensus on how the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should be resolved. A negotiated two-State solution is the only way to achieve a durable peace. Therefore, Palestinian State-building and strengthening of the Palestinian economy must continue. It is critical to the viability of the two-State solution.

Norway chairs the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee for the Coordination of the International Assistance to Palestinians (AHLC). This is the only existing international mechanism in which both parties meet regularly and engage in a serious dialogue to resolve outstanding issues, with the assistance of the major donor countries. As a State-building project, the AHLC is actively underpinning the two-State solution.

The next AHLC meeting will be held in Brussels on 4 May, with the European Union as host. There has been a significant drop in budget support from donors, which has led to a serious financial gap for the Palestinian Authority. Norway calls on the donors to reconsider their aid commitments and to disburse the pledges made at the Cairo conference in 2014. With respect to the meeting, Norway calls on the parties to progress on resolving outstanding fiscal issues and implementing the electricity agreement from last fall. Norway encourages the parties and the donors to move faster on key infrastructure projects on water and energy, especially in Gaza.

We also call on the parties to demonstrate commitment to the two-State solution and to take credible steps to reverse the current negative trends on the ground, including settlement activity and acts of violence. Only the parties can resolve this conflict, but the international community must remain engaged and contribute actively to the peace efforts.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Bahrain.

Mr. Alrowaiei (Bahrain) (*spoke in Arabic*): Madam President, I should like at the outset to thank you for having convened this meeting at a time when the Middle East is witnessing numerous challenges and crises that are having a serious impact not only on the region but also on the entire world.

For a just and lasting peace to prevail in the region, the Palestinian people must recover their inalienable rights, including the establishment of an independent Palestinian State, within the 1967 borders and with East Jerusalem as its capital. There must be an end to the Israeli occupation throughout the Palestinian territory. In this context, resolution 2334 (2016) was a historic turning point, as it calls on Israel to put an end to the settlement policy in the occupied Palestinian territories. This was indeed a victory for the Palestinian people, as well as evidence of international consensus, even unanimity, on this issue. The only way to achieve peace is to implement the resolution.

The international community must shoulder its responsibilities and oblige Israel to uphold international law and the relevant Security Council resolutions. This is the only way to ensure a peaceful future of tolerance for the entire Middle East and the world as a whole, as this is a threat to all.

In addition, the Syrian crisis continues unabated, and the tragedy of the Syrian people is ever-growing. A crime was recently perpetrated that runs counter to international law: the chemical-weapons attack in Khan Shaykun. The attack caused the deaths of hundreds of people and many injuries. This should push the international community to find a peaceful solution to the conflict in Syria so that the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people can be addressed and terrorism, which is a problem in various parts of Syria, combated. Today crimes are being perpetrated, indirectly or directly, all of which prevents the Syrian people from fulfilling their aspirations.

Here we would like to underscore the need to ensure compliance with the ceasefire throughout the country and to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance to the civilian population in Syria so as to alleviate their suffering.

I turn now to Yemen, our neighbour, which is experiencing serious interference today from certain foreign forces. That is why progress must be made in the framework of the Arab coalition that is working in the country today, of which Bahrain is a part. Let us enable the legitimate Government, led by President Mansour, the opportunity to exercise all of its functions. In addition, all political stakeholders and parties must work together in a concerted manner so as to achieve the legitimate aspirations of the Yemeni people and achieve a lasting peace. Full support must be provided to the Special Envoy, Mr. Ould Cheikh Ahmed.

We call on the Islamic Republic of Iran to comply with the principles of good-neighbourliness, uphold the sovereignty of the States of the region and halt its interference in neighbouring States.

Finally, the conflicts under way today in the region and the backsliding in the peace process show that the current situation is untenable. That is why the Kingdom of Bahrain continues to work alongside the international community to tackle the challenges facing the Middle

East region and to combat all of the threats looming on the horizon. We wish to see a future of peace, stability and prosperity.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Chile.

Mr. Barros Melet (Chile) (*spoke in Spanish*): Madam President, I wish to thank you for having convened and for presiding over this meeting on the agenda item on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question.

Chile wants to see peace in the Middle East, especially between Israelis and Palestinians, and supports the two-State solution so that they may live in peace and security within internationally recognized borders. The members of the international community should foster, individually and collectively, the peace process by promoting the relaunch of negotiations and responsible conduct by the parties during such negotiations.

Chile warmly welcomes the adoption by the Security Council in December of resolution 2334 (2016), on all measures aimed at changing the character or status of the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967, including East Jerusalem. We agree that the construction and expansion of Israeli settlements in Palestinian territory jeopardizes the viability of the two-State solution, which is based on the 1967 borders. We therefore welcome the adoption of resolution 2334 (2016). It is now a matter of ensuring the full implementation of the resolution and of all prior agreements.

Chile takes note with disappointment of the Israeli announcement at the end of March of the construction of new settlements in occupied Palestinian territory. We reiterate that this is illegal under international law. We trust that the Secretariat will substantially report, in writing, on the implementation of the resolution and any violations thereof.

We also reiterate the importance of the parties promoting a culture of peace and non-violence through education and public outreach, as stipulated in General Assembly resolution 61/271.

Chile takes this opportunity to reiterate its condemnation of the use of chemical weapons in Syria. The recent pictures that showed clearly the suffering of women, children and other civilians were shocking and harrowing. Now more than ever, the United Nations must play a key role, as must its relevant institutions. Any response to violations of the international Chemical Weapons Convention must always take place in the framework of international law and in line with the Charter of the United Nations.

The Syrian conflict, as we have stated on many occasions, can have only a political solution, towards which the Council must work in the context of its decision-making. In that respect, we stress that the veto is not a right but, rather, a great responsibility. For this reason, Chile reiterates its call for a limited use of the veto in relation to Palestine, Syria or any other conflict, on the basis of the code of conduct developed by the Accountability, Coherence and Transparency Group with regard to Security Council action in response to genocide, crimes against humanity or war crimes, as well as on the basis of the Franco-Mexican initiative, which we deem complementary.

Finally, the Syrian conflict and its ramifications, despite their extreme gravity, should not divert the Council's attention from the Palestinian question or from the need for the full implementation of resolution 2334 (2016).

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Iceland.

Mr. Gunnarsson (Iceland): Allow me to thank the United States presidency of the Security Council for organizing today's quarterly debate on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question.

Allow me to also thank Mr. Mladenov for his briefing.

The Middle East region remains in a state of turmoil. Complex internal conflicts have led to displacement and suffering on a massive scale, with famine looming in many areas, including in Yemen. The work programme of the Security Council is heavily charged with issues of the region, with separate meetings and reports on various aspects of Syria, Yemen, Libya and Iraq.

Iceland participated in the Brussels conference on Syria earlier this month. Along with many others, we have committed significantly increased funds to alleviating the humanitarian impact of the Syria crisis. We have also welcomed Syrian refugees in Iceland, in coordination with Office of the United Nations Commissioner for Refugees. The continued targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure by the Syrian Government and rebel forces, particularly medical facilities, is completely unacceptable, and the use of

chemical weapons at the beginning of this month, with strong evidence pointing to the Syrian Government, is outrageous. The perpetrators of that and other acts which violate international law must be brought to justice. That is why the work of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons-United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism is of key importance and why Iceland supports the Syria accountability mechanism.

The Security Council has a clear responsibility to end the conflict in Syria and pave the way for a political solution — the only way forward. All parties to the conflict have a responsibility for making peace negotiations work. In particular, that responsibility lies with the Al-Assad Government and its State backers, Russia and Iran. The hopes raised by the Astana process, and the energy put into the main United Nations-sponsored Geneva peace process require concerted political energy and will. The failure to establish a proper political peace process will cause continued suffering among the Syrian people and allow for the violence to further spread into neighbouring States, such as Lebanon.

Despite the bleak outlook in much of the region, there is one conflict that should be amenable to resolution and where preventing further conflict should be possible. I am referring to the Israel-Palestine conflict. The two-State solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict is the only viable peace plan, and it has been on the table for years. It should therefore be a key priority of the Security Council to protect and nurture the two-State solution, even when both parties to the conflict seem, at times, hell-bent on tearing that plan up. On the one hand, we have violent acts by individual Palestinians against Israeli citizens and the frequent firing of rockets into Israel and that is totally unacceptable. On the other hand, we have Israel's constant undermining of the basis for a two-State solution through illegal settlements.

The Security Council took important damage control measures when it adopted resolution 2334 (2016) last December. The resolution aims to safeguard a key prerequisite for the two-State solution — the possibility of a viable territory for the Palestinian State. We welcome the first quarterly report by the Secretary-General, delivered orally on 23 March. The monitoring of the implementation of the resolution must continue.

Finally, in line with paragraph 9 of resolution 2334 (2016), we would urge an intensification and acceleration of international and regional diplomatic efforts and support aimed at achieving, without delay, comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of South Africa.

Mr. Mminele (South Africa): We join other Member States in expressing our appreciation to the United States for convening today's open debate on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question.

South Africa aligns itself with a statement delivered by the representative of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela on behalf of the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries. Nevertheless, my delegation wishes to make remarks on six critical issues.

First, South Africa is of the view that this quarterly debate should not stray from the core Israel-Palestine issue that has been on the Security Council's agenda for over 70 years. While several Security Council resolutions have been previously adopted — including most recently resolution 2334 (2016) last December, condemning the establishment of Israeli settlements in Palestinian territory — the Council has failed to act decisively on the matter. It remains a stain on the Council's record. Therefore, while there has been no progress on the matter in the Security Council, today's open debate, at the very least, should provide the wider United Nations Membership with an opportunity to express their views on the conflict.

Secondly, on 3 April my Government issued a press statement through which it expressed its deep concern at Israeli plans to continue with its illegal settlements, in defiance of resolution 2334 (2016). That resolution affirmed that the establishment by Israel of settlements in the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967, including East Jerusalem, has no legal validity and constitutes a flagrant violation of international law. We hold the view that this development by Israel will undermine the conditions for successful final status negotiations and for advancing the two-State solution through those negotiations.

Thirdly, we note with disbelief that 2017 will mark the fiftieth year of Israel's military conquest of Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem. In his speech to the General Assembly in September (see A/71/PV.14), Palestinian President Mr Abbas urged the international community to exert greater effort than before to

establish a truly independent Palestinian State, and called on Israel to recognize the State of Palestine and put an end to its occupation, so that the State of Palestine can coexist alongside the state of Israel in peace and security as good neighbours. He said that in the context of the fiftieth anniversary this June of Israel's occupation. According to reports, during that period over 48,000 homes and related structures were demolished in West Bank and Gaza; 586,000 acres of Palestinian land confiscated, and 300,000 Palestinian refugees created. On that score, South Africa remains committed to working with Israel and Palestine, and with the international community, to find a lasting and durable solution to the conflict within the parameters of international law.

Fourthly, my delegation is of the view that it may also be useful to note in today's debate that, as there is increasing focus on a more effective implementation of resolution 1325 (2000) pertaining to women and peace and security, the reports from the Secretariat to the Council on the situation in the Middle East should also regularly include a specific focus on the impact of the conflict on women, who face specific challenges under the occupation.

Fifthly, with regard to the central stance reflected in the concept note (S/2017/305, annex), the upsurge in acts of terrorism globally and in the Middle East reaffirms that terrorism continues to be a threat not only to international peace and security but also to fundamental rights and freedoms. South Africa condemns in the strongest terms possible terrorist acts wherever they occur and by whomsoever they are committed. We support the approach that continues to place the United Nations at the centre of multilateral efforts to counter terrorism. We remain firm in our belief that no country can address the challenging and complex threat on its own, and that terrorism will not and cannot be defeated by military means.

Last but not least, we wish to highlight the plight of Palestinian prisoners, especially during this time when, according to reports, 1,100 of the 6,200 in eight prisons in Israel are on hunger strike, in protest over conditions in Israeli prisons. They are calling for improved conditions, including regular family visits, improved medical care and an end to the practice of holding hundreds of detainees without charge.

In conclusion, my delegation firmly believes that dialogue and negotiation remain the only way forward to finding a lasting solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Furthermore, I would like to reiterate my delegation's commitment to continue working within the United Nations and other multilateral structures to seek ways of countering the threat posed to international peace and security by terrorist acts in an effective and efficient manner.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of the United Arab Emirates.

Mr. Al Musharakh (United Arab Emirates) (*spoke in Arabic*): On behalf of the United Arab Emirates, I congratulate the United States on acceding to the presidency of the Council and appreciate its presiding over this quarterly debate. I want to thank Mr. Nikolay Mladenov, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, for his briefing earlier today.

The United Arab Emirates associates itself with the statement delivered on behalf of the Group of Arab States. I should now like to make the following brief points in my national capacity.

The United Arab Emirates is gravely concerned about the violence and counter-violence in the occupied Palestinian territories, and the absence of a just solution that grants the Palestinian people their inalienable rights. The plight of the Palestinian people has endured for nearly seven decades, and it must stop. To that end, we call on the international community and the Security Council to take all measures necessary to reach a two-State solution. Such an outcome must allow for the establishment of an independent Palestinian State, based on the June 1967 borders and with East Jerusalem as its capital, pursuant to relevant resolutions, the Arab Peace Initiative, and the Madrid principles. Finding a resolution to the Palestinian question remains a fundamental priority for the United Arab Emirates. To that end, we echo the call in resolution 2334 (2016) for Israel to cease its illegal settlement activities, which pose a major obstacle to the two-State solution.

The paramount aim for the United Arab Emirates is the promotion of security and stability in our region. In Syria, we are particularly alarmed by the continued and heinous use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime, and we express our full support for the United States military operations against military targets in Syria. We call on all parties to work to ensure that non-State actors and extremist militias are not in control of the country. The international community must work to create a space conducive for the Syrian people to

determine their own future. To that end, we urge the United Nations-brokered peace talks to move forward towards a positive outcome.

In Yemen, the Houthi militias are endangering not only peace and security in the country, but also the peace and security of the region, particularly through attacks across Saudi Arabia's borders. The only way to resolve the conflict in Yemen is through the United Nations-led peace process, based on the resolutions of the Security Council, the initiative of the Gulf Cooperation Council and the outcome of the National Dialogue. Until lasting peace is achieved in Yemen, ensuring humanitarian access to civilian populations must be the priority.

The conflicts in Syria and Yemen share one common denominator — Iran. Iran has increasingly caused tension and instability in our region, posing an existential threat to the Middle East through its expansionist policies, export of its revolution to other countries, flagrant violations of international sovereignty and constant interference in the internal affairs of neighboring countries. We stress that Iran is a State sponsor of terrorism in our region, from Hizbullah in Lebanon and Syria to the Houthi militias in Yemen, and terrorist groups and cells in Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. The list goes on.

The United Arab Emirates offers three proposals with the aim of promoting security throughout the Middle East:

First, in light of Iran's rampant interference in the region and flouting of numerous relevant resolutions, we urge the Security Council and its sanctions committees to pursue their best efforts to investigate, report and act on Iran's sanctions violations.

Secondly, we call for special attention to be paid to the plight of youth across the region as a key priority. In the absence of economic opportunities, the young people of the region are being exploited by terrorist organizations. This is especially true for the youth of Palestine, who are the future and would give new life to the peace we all seek.

Finally, in order to build the necessary momentum for a peace process, we call for greater engagement with regional organizations and actors, especially through multilateral forums, such as the United Nations. In this regard, respect for international law is key to stability, and we call on all Member States to comply with the decisions of the Security Council, in accordance with Article 25 of the Charter of the United Nations.

To conclude, the United Arab Emirates confirms the importance of these quarterly debates and the urgent need for efforts to drive peace in the region. I wish the United States continued success in stewarding the work in the Chamber for the remainder of the month.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Nigeria.

Mr. Itegboje (Nigeria): I thank you, Madam President, for convening today's open debate, which provides an opportunity for reflection on the situation in the Middle East. We commend Special Coordinator Mladenov for his very lucid briefing and for sharing his perspective in the search for peace in the Middle East.

Nigeria aligns itself with the statements delivered by the Permanent Representatives of Uzbekistan and Venezuela on behalf of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Non-Aligned Movement, respectively.

For too long, the situation in the Middle East has remained a matter of concern to the international community. Today's debate opens against the backdrop of a tense situation in Gaza, where a new energy crisis is now unfolding. Nigeria recognizes the fact that reform of the Gaza Electricity Distribution Company is essential to improving revenue collection and transparency, in line with international standards. The authorities in Gaza must ensure that collection rates are improved and that revenue collected in Gaza is judiciously utilized in order to keep the fuel and electricity supply flowing.

Indeed, the social, economic and political consequences of the impending energy crisis should not be treated with levity. Palestinians in Gaza, who live in a protracted humanitarian crisis, can no longer be held hostage by disagreements, divisions and closures. It is imperative for all parties, including the international community, to act in concert and ensure the early resolution of the vital issue of energy for Gaza. The United Nations must play a vital role in achieving this objective.

Our unequivocal message, today as always, is a simple one. There should be an independent State of Palestine existing side by side with a secure State of Israel, free from threat and intimidation. I have no doubt that the entire Council is united on this. Speaking with

one voice, it is important for the Council once again to call on the parties to resume direct negotiations without further delay on all the permanent status issues, in particular borders, security, the status of Jerusalem and the return of Palestinian refugees.

Each of the parties can play an important role in fostering peace. To that end, we call on Israel to take concrete steps to freeze all settlement-related activities in the West Bank and East Jerusalem as a confidence-building measure. On their part, Palestinian leaders must also signal their readiness to return to the negotiating table by making enhanced efforts to forge unity and deal with militancy and other internal security challenges. It is beyond doubt that neither military might nor militancy will resolve the protracted conflict.

It is obvious that the current stalemate in the Middle East peace process is neither ideal nor sustainable. Both sides must take concrete steps to return to negotiations on the basis of the relevant Security Council resolutions, the Quartet road map, the Madrid principles, the Arab Peace Initiative and the relevant agreements between them. Nigeria supports the efforts of the international community towards establishing an environment conducive to a return to meaningful negotiations to end the occupation and resolve the long-running conflict.

Another phenomenon that compounds the situation in the Middle East is the threat of terrorism. It is expanding and intensifying, affecting a greater number of countries in the region. Terrorist groups have laid claim to territory and set up administrative structures. They are gaining access to significant funding streams, which they use to support their destablizing activities.

Criminalizing the financing of individual terrorists and terrorist organisations, impeding the movement of foreign terrorist fighters, implementing relevant United Nations sanctions regime and taking multilateral action are some of the most potent weapons in the arsenal of the international community in the war against extremism and terrorism. It is imperative to strengthen international cooperation in order to effectively combat the Islamic State in Iraq and the Sham and other terrorist groups. A comprehensive approach within the scope of the rule of law and due process, respecting all principles of the Charter of the United Nations and international human rights and humanitarian law, is essential. This calls for urgent action.

The President: I give the floor to the representative of Haiti.

Mr. Régis (Haiti) (*spoke in French*): On behalf of the Government of Haiti, I should like to congratulate the Security Council on taking the initiative to meet in open debate, which reflects the sense of urgency aroused by the current situation in the Middle East. I have noted with great interest the themes addressed in the concept note (S/2017/305, annex)of the United States presidency of the Council for April, as well as the very relevant points raised by the United Nations Special Coordinator for the the Middle East Peace Process, Mr. Nickolay Mladenov, and the speakers who have preceded me.

From one summit to another and one conference to another, the calls for action resound everywhere, giving new impetus to the peace efforts in the Middle East. The hope of a just, lasting and comprehensive settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that were raised by the 1993 Oslo accords has gradually faded over the years, undermined by the increasing mistrust between the parties, the temptation of fait accompli and unilaterism. Against this backdrop — marked by the total absence of any political and diplomatic progress, new crises, the rise of violent extremism, civil and regional wars with their terrible human of 500,000 deaths in Syria, their processions of horrors and their humanitarian challenges — the current situation on the ground is no longer sustainable, as the Special Coordinator rightly pointed out.

The Israeli-Palestinian peace process is clearly at an impasse. The two-State solution appears to be more threatened every day. In addition, from Syria to Yemen via Iraq and Libya, the region has been plagued by a succession of crises that, by their magnitude and severity, have eclipsed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and obscure the continuing threat to peace in the region and in the world.

The Republic of Haiti, faithful to the cardinal position that it has held unwaveringly since 1947, reaffirms its support for a just, lasting and comprehensive settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, believing as it does that the only way to achieve that goal is through a negotiated solution, with two States living in peace and security within secure, recognized and guaranteed international borders. It therefore adds its voice to all those raised in favour of innovative initiatives aimed at placing the Israeli-Palestinian issue at the heart of international concerns so as to allow a rapid resumption of negotiations in the spirit of the relevant resolutions of the Security Council and the General Assembly.

The purpose of this special meeting is to highlight the fundamental issue of peace and security in the Middle East for the entire international community. At the same time, it also raises the question of the capacity of the United Nations — and, consequently, the responsibility of the Security Council, which is the principal guarantor of international peace and security — to ensure its preservation, particularly in the Middle East region.

Indeed, it has become almost a commonplace to evoke the deadlock in the Security Council, in particular in the light of the abusive use of the right of veto. This paralysis is often perceived as one of the main institutional obstacles to international peace efforts in the Middle East. There was a striking illustration of this in the recent debate of the Council following the use of chemical gases against civilian populations in Syria (see S/PV.7922). That was further proof — if it were still needed — of the need to remedy this recurring impasse and to provide innovative solutions to the Council's decision-making process so as to enable it to fully undertake its mission of addressing the root causes of conflicts, identifying potential threats and acting expeditiously when circumstances require urgent action.

It was in that spirit, moreover, that the Republic of Haiti supported the recent French initiative, the merits of which remain undeniable, aimed at limiting the right of veto, particularly in the case of mass atrocities. Here, we must salute the tireless efforts of Liechtenstein and Mexico to that end, for it must be emphasized that, beyond the privilege attached to it, the veto imposes above all, for those who exercise it, a duty and a special responsibility with regard to the international community.

In the explosive current context of the Middle East, where the suffering inflicted on the civilian population by extremism, terrorism and civil wars has become incommensurable, the Council cannot shirk its stark obligation to address the root causes of the conflicts in Syria, Yemen and Iraq, which are tearing the region apart, decimating religious and ethnic minorities, and threatening international peace and security. With particular reference to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the time has come to recapture the initiative and create the conditions for a resumption of negotiations between the parties in the light of the convergences emerging from the relevant Council resolutions, and the steps taken by various bodies, including the Quartet or the recent Paris conference on the Middle East. The status quo cannot take the place of a solution.

It is time to revive the peace process in the Middle East. Everyone has responsibilities. In particular, each member of the Security Council must rise above its own biases and transcend its own interests in order to help the parties concerned to resume the path of negotiation and move forward on the road towards a sustainable and comprehensive solution on the basis of a mutually agreed framework.

The Republic of Haiti has always condemned the use of war as a method of conflict resolution. It considers that, in the face of the risk of heading down the slippery slope of violence and widespread conflagration, a dogged search for peace in the Middle East is what is needed. The ability of the Council to adequately play its role as an irreplaceable player in this process depends strongly on the individual commitment of each of its members to the ideals of peace, security, solidarity, cooperation and development on which the United Nations was built.

Today's meeting could signal a new beginning, where the destructive dynamics prevailing on the ground are reversed and a genuine peace process based on law, justice, security and mutual respect is undertaken in the Middle East. Let us seize such an opportunity.

The meeting rose at 4.30 p.m.